

KESTREL EDGE
AND OTHER PLAYS

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BY

WILFRID GIBSON

HACHILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
1 MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1924

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LOVERS' LEAP

PERSONS

ANGUS EARNSHAW, *a young farmer*

LUCY EARNSHAW, *his wife*

RACHEL EARNSHAW, *his mother*

ALEC EARNSHAW, *his brother*

ESTHER BURN

ADAM BURN, *her* } *Farm servants*
younger sister }

SCENE I

SCENE: *The kitchen of Windwhistle, a Border farmstead, on the evening of May term-day: LUCY EARNSHAW, at the table in the middle of the room, ironing: RACHEL EARNSHAW, sitting by the hearth, darning hose.*

RACHEL: You've done it!

LUCY: Done it?

RACHEL: Sure enough.

LUCY: And so,

It's I that's done it—I'm to bear the blame?

I'm to sit mumchance, while my servant-girl's

Flaunting her shame to all the countryside:

And everybody guessing . . .

RACHEL: Little call

To waste much wit in guessing.

LUCY: Nay, God knows,

My husband's name's in all the neighbours' mouths

Coupled with thon bold-eyed loose-petticoat.

RACHEL: Neighbours, say you? Buck-rabbits and
jack-hares

Real scandalised at such-like goings-on:

And, hark, a cock-grouse clucks such spicy tattle

Would make a black ram blush!

LUCY: Ay, sure enough,

A gey lone outby God-forsaken neuk,

Windwhistle and I sorely rue the day
Ever I clapt eyes on it

RACHEL Yet, last week
You seemed to find Windwhistle lively enough,
And over-thronged, and all, and couldn't rest
Till you'd cleared out the two too many

LUCY Rest,
Under the same roof with thon hussies & Nay!
I've tholed a deal, but even a worm will turn.

RACHEL To be retrodden on?

LUCY Ay, you can fleeer
And make a mock of me, you and your son !
You'll drive me daft, betwixt you What could I do
But send the baggage packing ? Could I guess
The other wench would side with her and go ?
Good riddance to a pair of sluts, say I

RACHEL And welcome to new wenches? Ay, you've done it.

Lucy Done it?

RACHEL Thon same sluts knew their work,
 they did

And we can't run the farm, wanting two hands

LUCY Well, hasn't Angus gone to seek new hands?
They're none so hard to come by, there's no lack
Of lasses at May hirings

RACHEL Sang the brandling,
 "The frying-pan's too hot, I'll try the fire "
 Sluts for sluts' work, say I and, anyway,
 You'd learnt the worst of them that sort can't hold
 A man like Angus He'll not fling himself
 From Lovers' Leap with such though I could fancy

A woman might get such a hold of him
He'd dash himself to death for her sake—ay,
Would leap headlong with her, and never blench,
If 'twere the only way. He's got the spirit—
Just such another as the lad who leapt
In the old story : but the lass, I doubt,
Is far to seek who'd take the plunge with him ;
And yet, you never know, you never know :
He may lie broken at the crag-foot yet :
He's just the headstrong breed that . . .

LUCY: Mercy me,
What keeps you raveling about Lovers' Leap?

RACHEL: I've always had a liking for those lovers :
They took their road—left talk to other folk.
It's only deeds that count : that's why, although
I loathe the things men do, I envy them
The doing. Men can act, while women nag,
Or eat their hearts out, brooding : though there once
Were womenfolk who scorned to sit and sulk :
But the days of Jaels and Jezebels are done.

LUCY: And why should Angus jump from Lovers' Leap?

RACHEL: If Angus loved, he'd be a breakneck lover:
But it wouldn't be for your sake, or for limmers
Like them you've sacked, and happen will live to rue
The sacking of.

LUCY: So I'm to sit down under . . .

RACHEL: Much sitting down at Windwhistle for you,
Or anyone, if you can't keep a wench!

LUCY: They aren't all baggages: and, whether or no,
I only did my duty.

RACHEL That you did ,
 And much good may it do you Turning out
 The black sheep, happen, you'll let in the wolf.
De'il kens who Angus will fetch home with him
 You're right where there's an Earnshaw, there's
 no lack

Of lasses and you've given your man the job
 He's born and bred to. Well, you'll soon learn now
 The tale of your new troubles , they'll be on you
 Before the hour's out. Angus won't pick up
 A brace of worn-out besoms, naught but shank
 And frowzy wisps, I'll warrant. He's no use
 For female scarecrows at Windwhistle, bless him !
 He's a true Earnshaw, with a lively eye
 For sonsy limmers and I mind his father
 Had a lucky knack of hiring orphans

LUCY Orphans ?
 You mean he

RACHEL Ay, no trouble with relations
 He was far seeing, Jake was

LUCY And you let him—
 You didn't care ?

RACHEL Care—care ! I could have killed him
 The first time—ay, and every time !

LUCY And yet .

RACHEL I didn't I'd not pluck enough I'm weak—
 Naught but a stickit and half hearted Judith
 Happen if I'd been the sort with spunk to knife him,
 There'd have been no call to do it, after all

LUCY And I'm to stand the like, without a word ?

RACHEL If you've the sense I never once let on

RACHEL How'll you prevent .

LUCY Give him a piece of my mind

RACHEL He's had a taste already I'd be doubting
You'd a deal left to spare

LUCY I'll let him know !

RACHEL A waste of precious knowledge —muckle
good,
School-teachering him—pearls before swine .

LUCY What's that ?

RACHEL You're not a scholar you'd not understand

LUCY He'll understand, before I've done with him .
He hasn't heard the last

RACHEL He'll hear the last
Before you've vented your spite and 'twill be he
Will settle when he's had enough, I reckon ;
Or I don't know the strain

LUCY You never fancy

RACHEL Never I only know. I've learnt my lesson
It takes a braw louse to browbeat a lion
In this world, Lucy, you've to

LUCY What a world !

RACHEL The world's as the Lord made it He'd
His reasons,

Doubtless and, whether or no, 'twould puzzle you
To make a better in six days, my lady
And certain-sure the Lord won't make it over
Every five minutes just to suit our notions.

A rare world it would be if every jenny
Had her own string, and could pull ! Lump it, or
like it,

It's all we'll get this side the coffin-lid

Yet, what a tug I'd give, if I'd the chance!
I'd turn things topsy-turvy, if I'd got
To frizzle in the devil's frying-pan
For ever after. I'd serve some folk out.
But I was speiring what you mean to do?

LUCY: To do?

RACHEL: Ay, do: the braw Windwhistle cocks
Have never yet been cowed by clockers' cackle.

LUCY: Do? There's not much that I can do, God
help me!

RACHEL: Nay, I was duberous you'd the spunk for
doing:
You're not the breed.

LUCY: You only said just now,
We can't change aught.

RACHEL: But we'd be wattikins
Never to try.

LUCY: What can I do?

RACHEL: Naught, naught:
You're not the mettlesome stuff' that might be doing.
You'd be no match for Angus: for all your clash,
You're a weak brashy body. Devil kens,
I've little room to talk: though I, at your age,
Was twice the woman you'll ever be, I'd not
A chance with Jake. 'Twill take you all your time
To do as much as I did.

LUCY: And what's that?

RACHEL: To hold your tongue.

LUCY: I'll never let my husband . . .

RACHEL: You'd pit yourself against an Earnshaw
—you!

And gloated over that body, cold at last,
Before the red bull gored him—ay, it took
A bull, Windwhistle Champion, to finish Jake :
No mankeen heifer could face him : and he died,
With life, a red-hot fury in his reins.

Then I was sorry.

LUCY : Sorry he should perish
In all the pride of wickedness ?

RACHEL : Nay, sorry
Jacob should perish in the pride of life,
With such a lust of living on him.

LUCY : Yet,
You could have killed . . .

RACHEL : If I'd not understood him.
It's understanding gars you hold your hand,
Even when the fingers twitch to grip the knife-haft.

LUCY : God ! a nice family I've married into—
A house of devils !

RACHEL : Smell the reek of singeing ?
Happen, it's only your iron. Ay, poor doll,
There's blood, not sawdust, in the Earnshaws' veins :
And Angus—though his story may end different :
He's young ; and still has time to meet his marrow
At some chance cross-roads, in the market-place ;
Or she may walk in here at any moment.

LUCY : Not while I live.

RACHEL : So, you've a mind to pitch
Yourself headlong from Lovers' Leap ? Not you !
And, anyway, you'd need to leap alone.

LUCY : She shall not cross . . .

RACHEL : Ay, you've the bragging tongue :

To watch the clash—and, anyhow, you'll learn
Your luck before you're many minutes older.
Angus and Alec should be back by this
With the old pig-cart creaking with new wenches.
You should have wedded Alec : he's no Earnshaw :
He's easy-going, neither kens or cares
If he's between the shafts or on the box—
A husband born : no Lovers' Leap for him,
No crashing over crag-tops to destruction—
And all for love ! If folk would wed their mates,
'Twould be a different and a duller world.

LUCY : Why ever did I marry ?

RACHEL : Ask another !

That question never found an answer yet
For any woman who'd the need to ask it.

LUCY : But why should men be . . .

RACHEL : Just because they're men ;

And so can't help themselves.

LUCY : And women must . . .

RACHEL : Remember they are women ; and that few
Have zest enough to satisfy the hunger
Of life that burns the body of a man.

LUCY : Ay, you're my husband's mother, sure enough :
But I'll not listen to such wicked talk.

RACHEL : Crinkling your dainty nose to sniff the
brimstone ?

Well, we're all sinners in a world of sin :
Yet wicked tongues whiles have the trick of truth.
If only a body's wicked enough, no call
For tarradiddles ; he can speak his mind.
It's only half-and-halfers need to lie.

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LUCY The truth!

RACHEL You doubt it? Is't not bitter enough?
But you've not learnt to savour truth by its tang.
I'm dubious you'll ever relish it

LUCY Would any decent woman like to hear . .

RACHEL Like? I said naught of liking Folk can
relish

A flavour they've no liking for and wives
Must needs soon lose the taste for lollipops.

LUCY It beats me, what you're driving at, at all:
First, I must do next, I must be a dummy,
And let my husband and his mistresses
Trample me in the clarts, without a murmur.
You talk for talking's sake

RACHEL Whatever else
Would any woman of sense be talking for?
The shrewdest tongue can't turn dolls into devils—
Nay, nor, poor poppet, men to marionettes
So, my last word to you is—Hold your whisht,
Whatever happens this side of the grave
You'll never rue a silence, nor want to cut
Your tongue out for not speaking

LUCY Sound advice
From you whose tongue is ever on the buzz,
Biting and stinging with its bitter jibes

RACHEL My tongue can wag now I'm a looker on,
Because it's had the wit to bide its time
Once it was muter than a mowdy warp's

LUCY I'm to believe that?

RACHEL

As you like

LUCY

Your tongue!

RACHEL: Ay, it kept dumb, though many's the time
I've bitten

My lips until I tasted the salt blood
To keep my tongue from lashing out. And you . . .

LUCY: Well, any way, I sacked the wenches.

RACHEL: Ay,

But can you keep it up? You've flicked the flies off,
For other flies to settle. When I speak
Of doing, I mean doing once and for all.

LUCY: I'd liefer die than let . . .

RACHEL: Hark!

LUCY: What do you hear?

RACHEL: Old Bessie clattering through the ford:
they're coming,

Angus and Alec, and who else, de'il kens!

LUCY: Who else? Two servant-girls my husband's
hired

To hoe and weed, pick stones, and muck the byre;
And they'll soon learn who's mistress.

RACHEL (*rising and throwing open the yard door*):
True for you:

We'll all soon learn who's mistress, sure enough.

*(Heard without—a grind of wheels and clatter of
hoofs; the swinging back of a gate; the
noise of a cart rumbling into the yard and
pulling up; the clashing-to of the gate; a
sound of voices; the jingling and stamping
of a horse being unyoked; then the tread of
steps approaching the door. ESTHER and
ADAH BURN, the new farm-servants, enter,
carrying between them a small, rope-tied*

wooden trunk which they set down on the threshold ESTHER BURN is a strapping girl of twenty with still, dark eyes RACHEL and LUCY EARNshaw stare at her, fascinated, without a word, while she stands quietly looking straight before her, as though she did not see them ADAM BURN is a slight, pretty girl of seventeen with restless eyes and a petulant mouth)

ADAM (*tossing her head*) Well, when you've taken stock of us, perhaps

You'll show us to our beds. We've had our tea—

'Thank you for asking' And I'm too dead sleepy

To try a staring-match with anyone

And then old pig-cart's joggled my poor bones

Till I'm all aches I've not been used to pig-carts

RACHEL Nor ought but Shanks's mare, and that ill shod

There'll be no pig-cart when you quit best order

Your ladyship's brougham to call for you, or learn

To keep a civil tongue, wench

ADAM

Civil tongues

Seem easily kept in this dumb house

ESTHER

Whisht, Adah

RACHEL (*lighting a candle, and going towards the door leading into the passage*) I'll show you to your attic. Fetch your kist

And mind don't dunt the walls, or bash the stair-treads.

They're weak, already, with bumping up and down
Of wenches' boxes every hiring-day.

ADAM Come, Esther, don't stand gaping like an owl

No call for you to be struck staring-silly,
Though it seems we've happened on a hoolets' nest.
If you can't speak up for yourself, at least catch
hold

Your end of the box; and let's away to bed.

ESTHER: Whisht, Adah, whisht!

ADAH: Nay, I'll say what I like!
I'll not be hushed by you or anyone:
I'm not a bairn now.

ESTHER: Nay—would God you were!

ADAH: "Hush-a-bye baby on the tree-top"? Ay,
'Twould suit somebody's games to keep me a bairn,
To hustle out of sight when ever a man
Keeks round the doorcheek, eh? Oh, but you're sly!
You think I'm simple, but I ken as much
Of men . . .

ESTHER: Pray God, you never ken as much!

RACHEL (*muttering*): "When the wind ceases, the
cradle will fall."

ADAH (*to ESTHER*): You keep
Your breath to cool your porridge, and your prayers
For them that ask you for them, lass.

RACHEL: "And down
Tumbles baby and cradle and all." But come along:
I can't stand here, while you two choose to squabble—
Wasting the candle. Are you coming, or no?

(*The two girls lift the box; follow RACHEL
EARNSHAW out of the kitchen, and are soon
heard climbing the stairs. When RACHEL
returns, LUCY is still standing, gazing after
them abstractedly.*)

But, dangerous?—just about as dangerous
As any other frightened hen. Shoo! Shoo!
Where are the lasses—packed them off already?
Well, they'd be tired.

RACHEL: What do they call the wenches?

ANGUS: Burn.

RACHEL: Sisters?

ANGUS: Ay.

RACHEL: Unlike enough, to be so.

ANGUS: Young Alec's flame is Adah, and the
other . . . (Pauses.)

RACHEL: Well, well: and so, you cannot mind her
name?

Perhaps, Alec . . .

ALEC: Ay, it's Esther.

RACHEL: And the virgin

Found favour in the king's sight.

LUCY: What's that you're mumbling?

RACHEL: You wouldn't understand: it's Bible-talk.

LUCY: This wicked house!

RACHEL: That you're the mistress of?

ANGUS: Ay, ay, there's mistresses and mistresses.

But dangerous, you said? I've never met
A dangerous woman yet. I'd like to tame . . .
I'd swap Windwhistle for a spice of danger.

RACHEL: You're lucky, if you lose no more than
that.

SCENE II

SCENE The same, about six o'clock the next evening
RACHEL and LUCY EARNSHAW setting the table
for tea

RACHEL (*going towards the window and looking out*)
 Time they were knocking off for tea—gey rough
 On them, to set them picking stones the first day
 LUCY I don't see why they're paid for picking
 stones

RACHEL You've never done it?

LUCY Not I! I've never been
 A servant but the biles of them are used
 'To field-work

RACHEL Ay, they're used to breaking their backs
 'To earn their own, and other people's, bread.

LUCY Well, someone's got to do it I don't see . . .

RACHEL You don't, and yet you talk. If you'd
 picked stones

From six to six, as I've done in my time,
 'tappen, 'twould open your eyes, and shut your mouth

LUCY My father'd have thought shame to set me to
 it,

RACHEL And rightly it's no job for any girl
 And thou lass Adah doesn't look over strong

LUCY 'Tut, tut 'twill do the brazen bildert good
 'To bend her back a little and anyway
 Lummers the like of her are born and bred
 'To such like jobs, they've always had to do it
 And so, don't feel

RACHEL: Not being flesh and blood?

LUCY: Well, beggars can't be choosers.

RACHEL: If they could
Some of us would change places. But there's naught
Of the beggar about the Burns: they've got some
spirit,

'Thon lasses: and, for all her quiet ways,
Esther's the prouder of the two, I take it.
Though I'm none easy daunted, I shouldn't care
To cross her will, or touch the quick of her pride.

LUCY: Byre-mucker's pride!

RACHEL: Pride doesn't always sit
With folded hands in the parlour.

LUCY: Well, it seems,
Angus is none too tender of their pride:
He kens the way to take with such: I trust
He'll keep them at it, till they sweat the starch
out.

RACHEL: Angus is like his father, hard on women:
He uses them; they're naught but bones and thews
To hoe, pick stones, and muck the byre for him;
And only flesh and blood to serve his pleasure.

LUCY: Well, thank the Lord, he doesn't seem too
soft . . .

RACHEL: Such men are never soft with womenfolk,
As you and I ken to our cost: their love's
A spark struck out of iron; and, while it chars
The windlestraw, it leaves the coulter unscathed
To plough fresh stubble.

LUCY: Well, you will be talking:
And doubtless you mean something, if I'd list

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For guessing riddles. But it's time I went
To tidy my hair

(Goes out of the door leading into the passage)

RACHEL It isn't tongues that set
The hardest riddles I've guessed Adah's secret,
For all her chatter but Esther puzzles me.
She sat mumchance at breakfast, and scarcely glanced
At Angus when he spoke to her Few women
Can keep their eyes off him She must be stone.
And yet, there's fire in flint. Well, here she comes.
I'll see if I can strike a spark from her

ESTHER BURN *enters quietly from the yard in her
working clothes*

You've had a long day of it.

ESTHER, Long enough

RACHEL A gey rough place for lasses, Windwhistle.
The master's a hard master

ESTHER Ay, he's hard
But I've been used to work

RACHEL Still, it was rough,
Setting you picking stones the first day

ESTHER Ay,
But masters should be hard

RACHEL You think so, lass?
It isn't every wench would say the same.

ESTHER I've known the other sort, that's over-easy
With hired-girls.

RACHEL Ay? And so you judge it better...

ESTHER A master should be master

True for you:

ESTHER: You mean?

Can take good care of herself.

RACHEL: Adah? Ay, she's tow
o flame, I'd fancy: that's why I'm warning you.

RACHEL: Well, it's only fair
to caution bairns a fire is like to burn.

ESTHER: We'll leave, to-morrow.

RACHEL : Leave? You've taken leave
Of your wits already, woman, to talk so ;
You can't go throwing up a place like that :
And, whether or no, why should you, now you're
warned ?

You might go further and fare worse. You can't
Be quit of danger till you're sodded down :
And, likely, you'd be running from one fire
Into another : for there'll aye be burning,
While there are men and women.

ESTHER : Seemingly
We've run from one fire slap into another.

RACHEL: You mean your last place?

ESTHER : Ay.

RACHEL: What happened, daughter,
To drive you from it?

ESTHER : That I cannot tell.

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RACHEL Your sister, likely

ESTHER Nay, she never knew.

I never let on to her why we'd to quit

RACHEL Well, anyway, at Windwhistle, I'd hazard,
Your sister's safe enough a decent lad

Is Alec and she's not the sort to take

The fancy of a man like but I'm hawering

ESTHER You mean that

RACHEL I mean nothing I'm just clashing
For clashing's sake, like an ill sneekit gate

And you're no "whistle-and-I'll-come-to-thee-my-lad."

ESTHER I've no fear for myself but if harm come
To Adah, there'll be bloodshed

RACHEL Bloodshed, woman!

You're crazy, surely

ESTHER Ay, I'm well nigh crazed—

Nigh driven desperate since my mother died,

Chivvied from place to place. Why can't folk let

Two decent lasses earn their bread in peace?

Why must men always pester

RACHEL Mercy me!

But I've struck out the sparks, and no mistake.

So that's the secret of the brooding eyes

And tight-shut lips? Less, I was only trying

To see if I could kindle you and it seems

I'm like to burn my fingers, for my pains

I always was a one for playing with fire

Happen I'll burn the house about my ears,

Before I'm through. But I was only gabbing

You mustn't listen to my clatterjaw

I only

ADAH BURN *enters from the yard, and sinks wearily into a chair.*

(To ADAH): So, you're back?

ADAH: And trashed to death.

RACHEL: You've had a long day.

ADAH: Ay, and some folk seem
To fancy women are horses. I'm fair done:
But I'll not work another day like this.
And Esther there, she couldn't wait for me,
Though well enough she knew I was so dithered
I scarce could put one foot before the other.

RACHEL: The master's hard.

ADAH: Ay, but he'll meet his match,
Before I've done with him.

RACHEL: You fancy you . . .
You'll be the first that's ever been a match
For Angus: but, if you've a gosling's gumption,
You'll take things cannily, and not forget
Which side your bread is buttered on.

ADAH: I've to meet
The man would scare me. I ken far too much
Of men, I do.

RACHEL: You've never met an Earnshaw.

ADAH: Still, even Earnshaws are just men, I take it:
And—well, I fancy I can manage men.

RACHEL: You're talking like a fool. And whether
or no,
The tea's just ready. There's water in the scullery
For you to clean yourselves: I filled the basin,
And you'll find soap and towels. So, go your ways.

(ADAH rises, and she and ESTHER go into the scullery together, when a sound of splashing is heard Presently LUCY EARNSHAW enters from the passage)

LUCY They're back?

RACHEL (taking the teapot from the hob). The wenches are, and fair trashed out.

Angus is hard

ANGUS EARNSHAW enters, followed by ALEC.

ANGUS Hard—and who says I'm hard?
Not you, Lucy, I warrant you always swear
I'm over-easy with wenches Any limmer
Can twist me round her finger that's the song
You're singing me to sleep with every night

ESTHER and ADAM BURN enter from the scullery

Here's Adah, now she doesn't say I'm hard?
She's had an easy day

ADAM An easy day!
I'll never work another day like that

ANGUS True, true for I've been gently breaking
you in
I don't drive fillies overhard at first
You'll learn what working means before the week's out.
But Esther's broken already, she doesn't waste
Her wind her withers are unwrung I reckon
She's ready for another day's work now

RACHEL She keeps her counsel, like Dick Dobson's
nag,

Does Esther. When the galled jade doesn't wince,
Best drive her cannily, and watch her eye.

ADAH: She's got no spirit; but he won't drive me.

ANGUS: I won't?

ADAH: You won't.

ANGUS: Say that again: "You won't
Drive me."

ADAH: You won't . . . God knows, there'll be no need
For driving! I thought . . . but you've a way with
you. . . .

ANGUS: I've yet to find the filly I can't master:
So don't try on your flighty tricks with me.

RACHEL: Ay, son, but if you must drive hard,
take care
It's not the quiet mare that breaks your neck.

ANGUS: The quiet mare? You mean . . .

LUCY: Stop yammering
Of mares and fillies—it's not over-nice
To talk of women so—and let's have tea:
It's getting cold.

ANGUS: Well, I must have a wash.
Come, Alec lad, no use to stand there, gaping;
She's got no eyes for you: p'raps when you've sluiced
The muck off she may like your bonnie mug.

ALEC: You hold your tongue, or I'll . . .

(Breaks off.)

ANGUS: Well, razor-wits,
You'll what? Love's sharpening you; and at this rate
You'll soon have edge enough to cut yourself.

RACHEL: And Angus aye likes playing with edged
tools.

28 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

ANGUS And who would handle blunt? You cannot have

Too keen a cutting edge

RACHEL True, when the haft's

In your own hand

LUCY Rachel, you're hawering

You know that Angus never lets anyone else

Handle his tools

RACHEL Tools, whiles, turn in the hand

SCENE III

SCENE *The same, five days later, on Sunday afternoon. The kitchen is empty, but voices are heard in the scullery, and presently LUCY EARNSHAW enters, carrying a trayful of newly washed dinner dishes, which she sets down on the table. As she begins to arrange them on the dresser, RACHEL LARNSHAW follows with two wet towels which she hangs before the fire to dry.*

RACHEL A burnt bairn dreads the fire but a burnt woman,

It seems, will only shove her fist in further

Well, little use my talking If you're bent

On making a cinder of yourself, you've got to

I can't prevent

LUCY I've got to do my duty

RACHEL Your duty—ay, we all must do our duty

They taught us that at school "England expects . . ."

How does it run? And then he clapt his spyglass

To his blind peeper? But you've two good eyes,
And so, can see your duty plain before you :
It takes me all my time, with spectacles ;
And I've mislaid *them* now.

LUCY : They're in the parlour.

RACHEL : Well, I'm just going there now to read
my Bible.

LUCY : Your Bible—you ! I wonder you've the face !

RACHEL : 'Deed, I'm none easy daunted : but little
harm

In Bible-reading, surely? I look forward
The whole week long to Sunday afternoons,
And mastering a chapter. Well worth while
Cracking thon breakjaw names to get the kernel :
It always has a bite : and if you studied
The good book oftener, you'd ken more of husbands—
A deal of human nature in the Bible :
And, what with dwelling always among sheep,
And studying the Old Testament, I've learnt
No little about menfolk in my time—
Though it's not every ram's a Solomon.
Well, I'll away, and leave you to your duty :
And thank my stars I got mine over young,
And so can take things easy in my old age.

(RACHEL EARNSHAW *doffs* her apron, and goes
out by the passage-door. LUCY EARNSHAW,
who has not been listening to her last words,
sits down, and gazes into the fire with an
abstracted air. Presently a door closes
above : steps are heard on the stairs, and
ESTHER BURN, dressed for going out in her

*Sunday clothes, enters from the passage,
and is crossing to the yard-door when LUCY
EARNshaw looks up and speaks)*

LUCY Where are you bound for now?

ESTHER (*stopping*) I hardly ken
I was just thinking I would take a turn.

LUCY Ay, servant-lasses can go gallivanting,
While mistresses must slave

ESTHER I've done my work.

LUCY Happen' And so, you're walking out alone?
And where's your sister?

ESTHER She's not finished dressing.

LUCY And you can't wait till she's done titivating?
Dressing' And you, pranked like a popinjay,
While I'm still in my coarse apron. Some folk might
Make bold to ask where the likes of you can find
The money for such fakish ferd's—not I!

I wasn't born yesterday, though I am a wife—
Only an honest wife and I'm none curious

ESTHER I've worked to pay for every stitch I've on

LUCY Worked? Happen' Don't you dare to look
at me

Like that I'm mistress here, and won't let servants—
Let alone a barefaced .

*(Hesitates, daunted by the look in ESTHER's eyes,
but begins to speak again, as ESTHER turns
to go on her way)*

LUCY .

Not so fast, my lass
I wail' to have a word with you

ESTHER "

The word

You couldn't find just now?

32 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

Rachel is right they're just my husband's . . .

ESTHER Woman!

LUCY You call me "woman"? I'll teach you who it is
You're calling "woman" I'm your mistress yet.

ESTHER My mistress should rather die than . . .

LUCY Happen you're right.

But I, what can I do, when my own man . . .

ESTHER I'm sorry . . .

LUCY Sorry? Now you're mocking me.

ESTHER Mocking you? Nay!

LUCY Then I'll not have your pity

My stars, to think I married to be pitied

By a loose-petticoat! Of all the brass!

You think you can afford to pity me?

Of all the bold-faced trollops! I ken your sort;

You don't take me in with mum, sneaky ways,

And staring like a silly I've got your measure.

And I can tell you one thing, my fine lady—

Your day will be a short one here, and when

You're gone, I'll still be mistress of Windwhistle.

And so you cannot say I haven't warned you.

(ESTHER stands, steadily regarding LUCY)

What are you waiting for?

ESTHER

You've done?

LUCY

I've done

And now I may have time to go and dress,

Though I can't rig myself in such fine feathers

As my own servants I'd think shame to wear

(She breaks off, daunted by ESTHER's eyes, takes
off her apron, makes a show of folding it
with deliberation, and puts it in a drawer of

the dresser ; then goes out by the passage-door. ESTHER stands for a moment, as though dazed, looking after her ; then turns slowly towards the yard-door, but stops, startled, as she sees ANGUS EARNSHAW, standing in the doorway, watching her. He steps in, and crosses to the hearth, taking some strands of whipcord out of his pocket. ESTHER goes on her way ; but as she reaches the door ANGUS calls to her softly.)

ANGUS : Esther !

(ESTHER stops, but without turning or speaking.)

I want you. Where are you away to ?

To Lovers' Leap ? Ay, thon's the place to sit

On a fine afternoon—but, not alone.

Just bide a moment, lass : I want you here.

I've got to make a whip-lash, and need someone

To keep a hold of the cord-ends, while I plait—

Someone who'll not let go. You've got a grip.

I mind you hanging on when that nowt, Alec,

Tripped, and let go the lead, as he was taking

The red bull—or the red bull taking him. . . .

(ESTHER turns and comes slowly towards him, holding out her hand for the cords, which he gives her.)

What fingers for a wench ! I shouldn't care

To feel them at my thrapple, or have a welt

Across the jaw from such a neave as that.

But you're no scarting spitfire, letting fly

When a man least expects it. You've no need :

You've got too good a grip ; and can afford

34 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

To bide your time, as I'm learning to my cost
 But that will keep until This won't take long
 And then we'll go together I've a word
 I want to say to you, with no one by—
 Not that I mind eavesdroppers I'm the master
 In my own house, and brook no interference
 But it's as well

ESTHER Say all you've got to say
 Now When I walk, I walk alone

ANGUS You do?
 By God, that's so! I never kenne'd a lass
 Gan her own gait so quietly it's that—
 Just that, has done for me

ESTHER Done?

ANGUS Oh, you ken—
 You must, when I But it will keep till we're
 Perched snug together

ESTHER Say all you've got to say
 Here I'll not hearken to a single word
 You can't speak openly

ANGUS So, you defy me?
 Then I'll say all right out

ESTHER Best hold your peace
 Now . . .

ANGUS So you've changed your mind?

ESTHER Now and for ever

ANGUS. You threaten me? God's truth, I've never let
 A woman talk to me like that and I'll . . .
 You're the first wench that's ever wanted to—
 Leastways, no other's dared. But you've defied me
 To speak out now and I'll not 'bate a word—

Though why should there be need of words between us?
I'm used to my way : and devil all I care
Who hears what I've to say : they may as tite
Learn now, as later. 'Twill be little news
To them that ken me. Nay, they'll only judge
It's the old story : they'll not understand
The difference : it will taste the same to them,
Turning it on their tongues. You're just a wench
Like any other to them : their piddling minds
Can't take your measure, or mine. I've never been
A secret man : I've taken my own track,
But always tramped it openly—never cared
A tinker's curse for all their tittle-tattle :
So, likely, you'll have heard . . .

ESTHER :

Ay! to your shame . . .

ANGUS: Shame—what should Angus Earnshaw have to do

With shame? Shame's only for poor windlestraws
In trousers, secret lechers. I've never been
A hole-in-the-corner lover. I've some pride
I take my own road; and I'll step it out,
Shameless, to hell, if that be where it lead to.
I've never cared . . .

ESTHER : For all you've trampled on—
The women's lives destroyed.

ANGUS : Straws in the burning !
What reck's the fire o' flimsy wisps o' twitchgrass,
When it's hungry for real fuel ? And now, I've found—
I've found my mate. I'm sick o' petticoats :
I want a woman ; and, at last, I've got her.
Shame—what have such as we to do wi' shame !

*for a tryst, and crosses the kitchen towards
the yard-door)*

ANGUS Well, there is no accounting
For tastes—what say you, Adah? Esther swears
She'd rather stop and muck the byre, than take
A stroll.

ADAH (*stopping and turning*) The byre—on Sunday
afternoon?
She's crazy!

(*ESTHER goes quietly out by the passage-door*)

ANGUS So I'm thinking but I've tamed
A madder mare, before to-day

ADAH You've tamed?
You've not been bullying her? It's not your orders?

ANGUS She took her choice

ADAH Well, it gets over me
Why anyone should choose But she's pig-
headed,

When once she gets a notion We'd to leave
The last place without wages, just because

(*Breaks off.*)

ANGUS Because?

ADAH Oh, don't ask me! I only know
She got some maggot in her head and naught
Would satisfy her but a moonlight flitting

ANGUS Ay, ay, and you?

ADAH Oh, I'd to do her bidding
For peace' sake • and I couldn't say I'm sorry,
As things have turned out, that we made the change

ANGUS As things have turned out? And you'd do
her bidding

Like a good bairn again, if she . .

ADAH: No fear!
I gan my own gait from this on.

ANGUS: Ay, ay,
But you're the spirited wench, and no mistake!
You left without your wages then? You've got . . .

ADAH: Scarce a brass farthing to bless ourselves
with, till you
Choose to fork out.

ANGUS: Ay, ay—yet she would quit?
She's got some spirit, she has, the stubborn jade!

ADAH: Still, it gets over me why anyone
Should choose to muck the byre. You bullied her.
You should think shame. You'd better not try on
Those games with me. What are you smiling at?

ANGUS: Just wondering which you'd choose—mucking
a byre,
Or walking out to Lovers' Leap with me?

ADAH: With you? So that's. . . . But I can't
stand here chattering.
I'm late already.

ANGUS: Come, which would you choose?

ADAH: Small need to ask. (*Turns to go.*)

ANGUS: I'll follow in a moment.

ADAH (*stopping*): You'll follow? Nay, I never said
I'd go.

ANGUS: You'd rather muck the byre?

ADAH: No byres for me
On Sunday: and you cannot badger Adah,
Though Esther lets you bully her. She's too meek:
But I'd not stand it.

ANGUS: So?

ADAH: And, anyhow,

I've promised Alec I'd walk out with him

ANGUS You'd rather ?

ADAH Well, we're trysted for to-day .

And he's been waiting

ANGUS Ay, you've kept him dangling,

Kicking his heels, until he's nearly hacked

Thon gate to splinters That's the way to treat them

You ken a thing or two

ADAH I must be stepping

(As she speaks, ESTHER, in her working clothes, appears in the passage-doorway, and pauses for a moment ANGUS sees her, but ADAH does not)

ANGUS (to ADAH) So, I'm forsaken ?

ADAH Happen, if you behave,

Next Sunday

(ANGUS starts forward, as if to snatch a kiss, but ADAH eludes him)

ADAH Shame ! And you, a married man !

(ADAH runs out, laughing, but ANGUS does not follow ESTHER waits till she is out of hearing, then walks deliberately up to ANGUS where he stands in the middle of the room, looks him straight in the eyes, and speaks slowly and with difficulty)

ESTHER I'll meet you at the Lovers' Leap to-night.

ANGUS (starting) You mean . . . But why've you changed ?

ESTHER I can't afford

To wear my Sunday gown for mucking byres.

ANGUS But you've no call to do that now Why, lass, I only jested

ESTHER : Only !

ANGUS : You didn't fancy

I meant it, eh? Well, you ken better now.

Still, if you hadn't . . . but you've learnt your lesson.

ESTHER : I've learnt my lesson.

ANGUS : Ay, I knew I'd tame you.

ESTHER : And Adah ?

ANGUS : So, that pricked ? What should I want
With thon young flirtigig, when I've got you ?
Still, if you hadn't ! She will have no games !
I'd teach her what her pretty tricks are worth :
And when I'd done with her, she'd change her tune—
Her bragging trumpet blown, she'd whimper and whine
Like a broken-winded wheezy concertina,
She would, the doxy : and you'd be to blame.
But Alec's welcome to her, now that you . . .
'The moon will be up by ten o'clock to-night.
We'll sit on the crag together, and look down
On the glinting lough below—a dizzy drop,
If you let go. They say two lovers leapt
Together, in old days ; and didn't strike
The water, as they'd doubtless counted on doing.
They fell among the boulders at the crag-foot—
And their two bodies, smashed to smithereens !
But you and I are not the dizzy sort :
We'll perch there snug together—a risky perch
For lovers ; and that's why it suits my mettle.

(ESTHER turns from him, and walks slowly
towards the yard-door.)

ANGUS : Where are you bound for now ?

ESTHER : To muck the byre.

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ANGUS God! but I like your spirit. you're my marrow

(ESTHER goes out, without another word ANGUS gazes after her, then, turning, sees his mother standing in the passage-doorway, watching him)

RACHEL (coming into the kitchen) I've just been reading about Sisera
She was a game one, Jael

ANGUS What's that, old raven—
Croaking of bloody stories?

(A quick step is heard in the passage, and LUCY EARNSHAW hurries in, twisting up her hair as she comes)

LUCY Well, I never!
What's Esther after in her working clothes?
I was just tidying my hair for tea,
And saw her, in the glass, crossing the yard

ANGUS She's gone to muck the byre

LUCY This afternoon?
On Sunday? Well, I never heard the like
And only now, dressed up to the nines and all
For gallivanting! I can't understand
What's taken her—unless you made her do it?
She sauced you, and you bid her?

ANGUS Ay, I bid her

LUCY Well, I must say I like a man that's master
Of his own farm You're that, and no mistake
You'll stand no lip from any hind, not you
And that's the way to treat the baggages
Eh, Rachel, but you don't know everything.

You've been mistaken—that slut, dangerous!

RACHEL: A burnt bairn dreads the fire. . . . But,
thank the Lord
I'm nothing but a looker-on these days.

SCENE IV

SCENE: *An attic at Windwhistle on Sunday night.*
The wooden trunk stands open in the middle of the room; and ESTHER BURN, still in her working dress, folds her Sunday gown and other garments, and packs them into it. Presently a step is heard on the stairs: the door opens, and ADAH BURN enters, still in her outdoor clothes.

ADAH: I'm fairly trashed.

ESTHER: Where ever have you been?

ADAH: Stravaging over hill and dale with Alec.

ESTHER: You missed your tea.

ADAH: I missed it, and much else

I minded missing a deal more than tea.

ESTHER: What, Adah?

ADAH: Ah, you'd like to know, you would?

But that's to come.

ESTHER: To come?

ADAH: How I'll get through

The week, I cannot think: but, anyway,

It's something to look forward to. Please God,

I'll waste no more fine Sundays!

ESTHER: What's your meaning?

ADAH: That would be telling. You're too curious,
Esther.

44 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

ESTHER Alec's a decent lad.

ADAM A decent nowt!

ESTHER He's fond of you

ADAM Ay, ay, he's fond enough

But others . . . I was never meant to waste . . .

ESTHER And he'd be faithful.

ADAM Ay, a safety-match—

Strikes only on the box!

ESTHER You might do worse.

ADAM Or better I was never meant to waste
Myself on a gull like Alec Mercy me!

We've traiked and traiked, the blessed afternoon,
About the fells, like followers at a funeral,
Muter than tombstones

ESTHER You?

ADAM I've little enough
To say to boys, though I can talk with men.
And, when the gaby opened his *prim hips*,
'Twas just to yammer about whaups and peesweeps.
As if it wasn't bad enough to have
The silly creatures skirling all about us,
Making my blood run cold and thon lone fells—
I hate the fells I wouldn't bide a week,
If it wasn't for . . .

ESTHER Adah, you want to leave?

ADAM Leave now! What ever are you up to there—
Not packing, surely? Lord, have mercy on us!
'There's not to be another moonlight sitting,
Without a penny-piece?

ESTHER I'm packing up
To leave in the morning and you're coming, too.

ADAH : I'm coming ?

ESTHER : You are coming, lass, with me.

ADAH : I'll see you further ! Likely, I'd leave now !
And just because you've quarrelled with the master.
You were a fool to let him bully you, Esther,
And make you muck the byre. I've never yet
Let any man bully me. I wouldn't do
A hand's turn on a Sunday afternoon
For any master : I would sooner die. . . .
Though, I don't know—happen, I would, for one . . .
Might even relish being bullied, who can tell ?
I like a man to be a man, God knows.
But you'll not take offence at such as thon,
And throw up a good place ?

ESTHER : I go to-morrow.

ADAH : I see—I see : he's given you the sack—
You've lost your place ?

ESTHER : I've lost my place.

ADAH : You have ?
But I have not lost mine : I've got no quarrel
With Angus Earnshaw : he's not bid me quit.

ESTHER : Nor me.

ADAH : Well, I'm fair flummoxed ! First, you
say . . .

ESTHER : And last, we're through with Windwhistle
to-night.

ADAH : By crikey, no ! I'll not be dragged around
The countryside to please you. Leave again
Without a penny-piece, when I have sweated
Myself fair sick to earn a bit of brass
To buy myself some decent duds with—nay,

Not this time, Esther ! If you're set on flitting,
 Nothing will turn you, I ken well enough
 You've always been pig-headed: but you'll go,
 And leave me here

ESTHER I'll never leave you here -
 I've always taken care of you . I promised . . .

ADAH You promised mother? Ay, I ken - but she
 Is in her grave and I'm a bairn no longer
 A deal too much you took on yourself—you promised,
 Promised for me ! You've always taken care !
 You mammied me , and I was good to cuddle :
 You aye liked dollies , and I was your doll—
 Something to wash and dress, and slaver with kisses,
 And bribe with lollipops to do your bidding
 But I'm a bairn no longer If it's brats
 You're wanting, better wed and bear your own
 I'm a grown woman , and I'll gan my gait,
 Without your leave

ESTHER Adah !

ADAH Ay, Adah, Adah !
 You're not the only one that calls her " Adah "
 You're not her mistress now she's got a master.

ESTHER You poor, poor lass you little know what
 you say !

ADAH I know. Because he happens to be wed,
 You think I should . But I ken what I'm after .
 I'm no man's slave I've taught him that, already.

ESTHER Adah, have you forgotten mother's life ?

ADAH Why should I not forget ? She's in her grave,
 While I'm a breathing woman with my own life
 To live—ay, live ! not toddle and tumble through,

ESTHER : Then you mind
How father . . .

ESTHER : And you remember
The mother of the lass who came the day
They buried father ?

ESTHER: She was heartbroken, Adah, that her girl
Had died a shameful death: and it was father
Had brought shame on her—driven her to death,
To die of shame.

ESTHER: Addie, you little know
What you are saying—you little know . . .

ADAH I ken

His wife's a fool and fools must take fools' luck.

If dolls get in my way, well, dolls are brittle

When there's a clash, it won't be Adah Burn

Gets broken—nay, nor Angus Earnshaw, either

ESTHER Adah, you'd never give yourself to him?

You'd never throw yourself away? You've heard .

ADAH Tattle enough about the other wenches

ESTHER And still

ADAH I'll take my chance I'm not afraid

ESTHER 'Then I must tell you, Addie . .

ADAH Not a word!

Nay, I'll not heed I've listened all my life

It's my turn now for talking and I ken

'Twould suit somebody fine to keep me a bairn.

ESTHER 'Twould suit .

ADAH I ken you're jealous of me, Esther

ESTHER Jealous!

ADAH Ay, Madam Mum, so prim and proper

I ken your sort That's why we left the last place

You thought the master fancied me and so

We needs must quit But I've no quarrel with you

For that I couldn't abide old ginger-whiskers,

Myself, though, if I'd had a liking for him,

I'd have seen you straked, before I would have left

And Angus—ay, I've seen you look at him!

No woman ever looked in a man's eyes

Like that, unless I wasn't born blind, Esther

Would you have knuckled down this afternoon

At the bidding of any other man than him?

I didn't catch on then, but now I twig

I'd do the same myself : and, though you're jealous,
I cannot blame you : we can't help ourselves :
We're fated, Esther. When I first set eyes
On Angus at the fair, I knew my master ;
And fidgeted until I caught his eye :
And, once he saw us there, the trick was done.
He didn't shilly-shally : he knew his mind.
Blame you ? If I thought you or anyone
Stood in my way, I'd stick at nothing, woman :
And I'd not leave here for ten thousand pounds ;
Not if you begged me on your bended knees,
And mother's ghost—nay, not if my own fetch
Should stand before me now and give me warning.
If you were lying on your deathbed, Esther,
And begged me now, I couldn't.

ESTHER :

Not if I

Stood with the hangman's rope about my neck?

ADAM: The hangman's rope? You're mad! He said
you were—

Said he'd tamed madder mares than you. You're
crazed

With jealousy. I'm sorry. I can't help it:
We cannot help ourselves: we're never asked:
And I don't know I want to be made different,
Since Angus fancies . . . though it's hard on you.
But one must suffer always: and you've had ;
Your chance: we started equal; but you let
Him bully you: and now he thinks you're just
Another Lucy. Still, if you'd been the one
He'd fancied—but it won't bear dwelling on—
I'd have stopped short of nothing.

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ESTHER. You, my sister,
My only

ADAM Nay, but we're not sisters now .
We're just two women with a man betwixt us
I'd have stopped short of nothing so it's well
Things took the turn they did Yet I don't wonder
You're daft with disappointment. I'd go dotty . .

ESTHER Oh, if you only knew! Adah, that man . . .

ADAM (*putting her fingers in her ears*) Nay, I'll not listen to a word against him!

If you so much as breathe a syllable,
 'Twill take me all my time to keep my hands
 From ramming your spite back down your throat to
 choke you

Best get to bed, and try to sleep it off
You're over-wrought, working to-day and all,
After six days on end at picking stones
However I'd get through another week,
If I hadn't something to look forward to!
I'm just bone-tired with tracking moor and moss
With that fond gowk Whaups! I'm fair daft for
sleep

And you'll think better of it by the morning,
And not be set on leaving

ESTHER I'll not leave you.

ADAM. That's right. You know, lass, I'd do anything

I could to humour you—but I couldn't go,
Though it were certain death to bide

ESTHER. It's worse
Than death, the noise to --

ANGUS AJ, when you said you would
Though you ken the fashion to treat a man like me,
To keep me hungry and I like you better
For taking your own time You're mettlesome :
You've got my spirit, surely and it's fitting
Kestrel should mate with kestrel

ESTHER I took my time
And yet, you waited?

ANGEL Why, my bird, what else?
I kenned you'd come, when you had given your word.
As sure as fate

ESTHER *As sure as fate*

ANGUS As sure
As death.

ESTHER As sure as death

ANGUS Ay, once you'd promised
You're not the flighty sort you know your mind
You'll do what you've set out to do—go through
With any job you've put your hand to

ESTHER Ay

Acts. No turning you, when once your heart's
in it.

ESTHER, My heart!

ANGUS Ay, Esther, lass, you'd never
 have come.

If your heart had not been in it Let's sit down
A rare night, this

(ESTHER moves away from him to the edge of the precipice, and looks over)

ANGEL Nay, not so high the edge!
You might—but you are not the dizzy sort

So you can stand there, calmly looking down.
That's where the lovers leapt—a devilish drop!
And I could almost take the leap with you;
Though it would be a fearful ending, Esther,
To smash on the boulders.

ESTHER (*moaning*): Oh!

ANGUS: But you and I
Can stand together on the edge of danger,
Clear-headed—mates!

(*He moves towards ESTHER with outstretched arms.*)

ESTHER (*turning sharply*): You dare to touch me—
you!

ANGUS: Dare—and why not? I didn't come here,
my lass—

We didn't come here, I reckon, to spend the night
On the crag-top, a pair of standing-stones?

ESTHER: You came—I came: but only one of us
Will go alive from here.

ANGUS (*startled*): You mean . . . Nay, lass,
I'll hold you: and you shall not jump.

ESTHER: You dare
To lay a hand on me! Nay, I'll not jump,
And leave you living, to work your wicked will
On other women.

ANGUS: So it's I must leap:
And you're the one's to go alive from here?
You've settled it? I never knew your like:
You've got the nerve. By God! you make me
mad
To have you, and you know it: that's your game.

54 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

ESTHER You've not the courage to die of your own will

ANGUS Only the pluck to live. Do you suppose Any hen harrier, once he's got his claws in, And settled down to glut himself, lets go, To try and wring his own neck in a tree-fork ? To die—when I have never lived till now !

ESTHER You'll die and I'm prepared to pay the price

ANGUS The price ? You'd murder me, and hang for it ?

You fancy I'd let you ? But you're jesting, lass ?

ESTHER God knows which one will murder, which will hang

ANGUS So we're to fight it out, the two of us, Like haggards in mid-air ?—for you're no kestrel, Pouncing on grubs and shrews · it's heronshaws You fly at, Esther and I like your spirit You're game, but I'd not lay a finger on you Look, I'll stand here and you can send me spinning.

(ANGUS poises himself on the very edge of the crag, with his back to the precipice)

You daren't ? I thought not You would do a murder, And pay the price ? An easy price for you They seldom hang a woman nowadays, As well you know

ESTHER I didn't know I meant To pay the price

ANGUS That's true you're not the sort To want to kill a man, and then get off Scot-free, but, whether or no, 'twould be manslaughter.

I kill a woman here—and it is murder :
She kills me—and it's done in self-defence :
That's justice, nowadays. But, come, my haggard,
Enough of flighting. You know you never meant—
And, if you did, I like you better for it.
You're the first woman that's stood up to me.
You're my true mate, and put me on my mettle :
And now, by God, I'll tame you! Ay, you'll pay
The price! I'm just stark crazy for . . .

(ANGUS makes a sudden swoop on ESTHER. She flings out an arm to ward him off, and catches him under the jaw. He reels back, hangs a moment on the edge, then topples over with a cry. ESTHER stands, as if turned to stone; then sinks to the ground with a shuddering moan, and sits, motionless, gazing across the fells with unseeing eyes. Presently, a figure is seen hurrying up the slope, and ADAH BURN appears, half-dressed, and with her hair streaming behind her. Seeing ESTHER crouching in the grass, she rushes up to her, and seizes her roughly by the arm.)

ADAH: You're here, alone? I thought I heard . . .
My God!

You not alone—say that you're not alone?
I wakened in the night, to find you gone—
And then I saw it all as plain as day :
It shivered through me like a flash of wildfire—
Your words . . . You said . . . My God! why
didn't I see

56 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

The murder in your eyes, when you were talking,
So that I might have saved . . . Oh, woman, say—
Say you've not murdered . . . Say he never came!
You tempted him, that you might murder him—
But he's not come yet, and I'm still in time?

ESTHER He's lying at the crag foot.

ADAM And you killed him?

I might have known—you, with your icy eyes,
And your cold blooded jealousy . . . You fiend!
To stand there, jesting of the hangman's rope—
And all the while you meant . . . but you shall hang
You'll not escape . . . I'd drag you to the gallows—
Murderess, murderess! . . . Ay, I'll cry it out
To all the world! . . . To do it in cold blood!
Hot-blooded killing I could understand
I've half a mind, myself, to . . . And to think
~~in colder south as you could do as death~~
A man like Angus! . . . There never was a man
Like him . . . and now he's broken. . . Pity me
Tell me I'm dreaming, Esther . . . waken me
It's just a nightmare . . . take me in your arms,
And wake me with a kiss, and comfort me

ESTHER (in a low voice) . . . Addie!

ADAM You fiend! . . . Don't touch me! . . . And to
think

You were my sister—and now! . . . Oh, Angus, Angus!

*(She sinks to the ground in a half swoon, and lies
moaning. ESTHER does not stir. Another
figure appears, climbing the slope, and LARRY
EARNSHAW toils up, panting, and sees
ADAM.)*

LUCY: I guessed as much. I heard the backdoor-sneck,

For all your stealthy tricks. I've never slept
A wink this blessed night on my lone bed:
And when I heard the door, I sat upright
In time to see you, sneaking through the yard.
Then I was sure. It's more than flesh and blood
Can bear. (*Catching sight of ESTHER*) My sakes! Two
wenches! Where's my husband?

ADAH: Your husband, woman? I ken naught of
him:

I only know my man lies at the crag-foot.

LUCY: Your man?

ADAH: Ay, Angus.

LUCY: Yours!

ADAH: All mine, all mine—

And Esther's murdered him.

LUCY: What, Angus dead!

ADAH: Dead—dead: and she shall hang.

LUCY: I'll not believe

That any wench could murder such a man.

She tempted him—God knows, I ken too well

He needed little tempting: and he slipped

On the crag's edge—he always was foolhardy:

And now she wants to say she murdered him

To save her virtue, and so get sympathy.

But I shall tell the truth out: she shan't brag,

The slut, she's done away with such as him—

The like of Angus, murdered by a doxy!

Ay, but the world shall learn the truth: I'll have

My husband righted!

For pipes and timbrels have gone out of fashion :
 You've killed my son ; and I should curse you for
 it—

But, well, you've got to live, so where's the need
 For cursing? And he's dead, past cure of curses.
 And who am I to blame you, when I've gripped,
 Ay, many times, the knife-haft in my neave,
 Myself?—though I'd not pluck to put an end to . . .
 And now, father and son! And only Alec,
 Slumbering in his bed—the bed he'll die in
 Easily : no wild stirk or mankeen heifer,
 Seeing red, will cut off Alec in his prime :
 He'll see his children's children at Windwhistle.
 The world was made for slow-wits ; and their seed
 Inheriteth the earth. And Angus lies,
 Dashed to destruction by the fire of life
 That blazed within him, only to destroy him. . . .
 And once, I'd weep, if he but cut a finger!
 But you, whose hand . . . there's no escape for you :
 They'll never string you up : they seldom hang
 A woman nowadays.

ESTHER (*starting up*) : Ay, he said that.

RACHEL : He said that, did he?

ESTHER : I'd forgotten that.

(ESTHER *runs to the edge of the crag and peers over.*)

RACHEL : Hold her—she'll fall!

ADAH : Not she : she's peeping down,
 And gloating over him.

(ESTHER *draws herself to her full height ; stands rigid for a moment ; and then plunges over*

the precipice. The three women stand gazing at the spot, spell-bound.)

RACHEL Escaped! Escaped!

She's had the pluck to gain her own gait—ay!

(Turning to ADAM) You fool, she's done you!

ADAM (*sinking in a heap with a wail*) Ay, she's gone to him

RACHEL. Both broken—and they might have been such mates.

And bred such burns, if they'd not met too late

'The waste of it!'

LUCY (*in a dazed voice*) She stood right up, and
leapt

RACHEL Proud as a queen

LUCY She stood right up, and leapt . . .

But I'll not have it said, she murdered him.

And then took her own time, and killed herself

That was no ending for a man like him

RACHEL. You'd make a story—say they leapt together?

Lucy "Would be more like my Angus.

RACHEL Sure enough,

Res—would make a pretty tale, the Lovers' Leap!

1 meter

Men's wa,

Proud as a

Esther, say ye

ADAM She is

RACHEL

(To ESTHER)

must suffice

GANGRELS

RED ROWAN

PERSONS

WEAZEL, *an old horse-coper*

SLIM JIM }
HAREHEELS } *young horse-copers*

RED ROWAN, *an old woman.*

BLACKADDER }
NETTLE } *young women*

ALBERT EDWARD HIGGS }
 (of London) } *a tramp*

RED ROWAN

SCENE: *A horse-coper's camp near Yetholm, on the Border. It is a fine evening in late September, and WEAZEL, SLIM JIM, HAREHEELS, BLACKADDER and NETTLE lie about the fire on which their supper is cooking in a pot slung from a forked stake. To the left, at the back, is a muggers' cart, seen end on, with an arched canvas tilt. RED ROWAN stands near it, looking down on the company round the fire.*

RED ROWAN (to BLACKADDER): You, telling fortunes,
you—a chit like you,
Sneaking my customers with your saucy eyes
And fleeching flum! A deal you ken of fortunes—
Cheating the gonerels with your jookery-pawkry!
You should think shame, to rook them of their
earnings.

BLACKADDER: Well, I could tell your fortune, anyhow,
And free of charge.

RED ROWAN: My fortune!

BLACKADDER: Ay, no need
To rob your stocking to cross my palm.

RED ROWAN: You dare!
No one has ever told Red Rowan's fortune.
What's the world coming to! Why in my day . . .

BLACKADDER Your day? The day before the flood
I take it?

The world's been washed since then

You jezebel!

RED ROWAN
I'll teach you . . .

Ay, and time to take to teaching.

BLACKADDER
When you're past the doing

Past . . . But I ken too

RED ROWAN

well

Who 'tis encourages you—the poor old dobby,

Sporting the gaudy neckerchiefs you buy him

With the brass you've cheated me out of—rooking

pigeons,

To peacock Weazel into a holy-bizen

With red and yellow chokers, when it's time

He should be wearing black for his own funeral!

WEAZEL You mind your business

RED ROWAN

And it's not my business

When a young slut buys fairings for my man?

In my day

WEAZEL

Your day's over

RED ROWAN

Ay—and yours?

WEAZEL A man's day's never over till he's straked

RED ROWAN While a fresh petticoat, you mean .

WEAZEL

Just so

NETTLE Naught left for you now, Grannie, but
saying prayers.

HAREHFFLS And so Blackadder bought that kerchief,
did she?

BLACKADDER She did let's hear what you've to say
about it.

RED ROWAN: Ay, Hareheels, my fine lurcher, you're cut out

By that old dog. Your doxy . . .

HAREHEELS: Hold your jaw,

You randy! You look after your own man;

And I'll . . .

BLACKADDER: You'll?

NETTLE: Nay, but Hareheels mustn't quarrel
With Weazel's leavings, when it's all he'll get.

SLIM JIM: A bare shank-bone!

NETTLE: Ay, Grannie fares the best:
She's got a braw young fancy-man. Those two . . .

SLIM JIM: A cuckoo, mated to a carrion-crow!

HAREHEELS: I'd see the hag to hell . . .

WEAZEL: Now, no bad language.
A little pleasant chaff among old friends
Is well enough, and helps to pass the time:
But I won't let a lady be insulted:
And, Hareheels, lad, you should respect grey hairs.

RED ROWAN: Grey hairs!

WEAZEL: Ay, lass, the flame's gone out of yours—
Red-rowan turned to old-man's-beard.

RED ROWAN: Old man's!

WEAZEL: A bonnie flare it was, when you were
young:

I've never known a fierier poll: but ashes
Are the end of every camp-fire; and the blithest
Burns out the quickest.

RED ROWAN: Ay, yet you may find
A spark still smoulders, hot beneath the ash.
Old man's! And you're a nice young man to talk,

With a pow like a dandelion-clock, half-blown ·
 And who'll respect grey hairs, when an old man lets
 Himself be made a fool of by a slut
 With a poll like a tar-brush?

WEAZEL

Dandelion-clocks

Whiles take the fancy of wenches—"This day, some-
 day . . ."

RED ROWAN Ay, till they've puffed them bald
 and you forget

How the game ends it's "This day, someday—never!"

WEAZEL I'll take my chance When the old fire's
 burnt out,

It's time to strike the camp rain-puddled ash

Won't warm an old man's bones

RED ROWAN

You'll let that trollop

Make a mommet of you?

BLACKADDER

Leave me out of it,

The two of you, if you must vent your minds

In radgy slack. I'll not be parcelled out

To any man If I've a turn for Hareheels,

He'll serve my turn and, if I fancy Weazel,

He'll be my fancy man so, there's an end

SLIM JIM How about little Jim?

NETTIE

You dare to monkey . . .

BLACKADDER End, did I say? There'll never be an
 end

While there's a man can striddle a horse

NETTLE

You dare

To monkey with Jim!

BLACKADDER

I'll leave Slim Jim to you

He's got what he deserves and I'd not rob you

Of your one chance. You and Red Rowan fancy
There are no other men in the world for me
Than Weazel, Hareheels and Slim Jim. Who knows
What callant may be galloping even now
To swing me to his saddle?

RED ROWAN (*to WEAZEL*): You hear the baggage?
You'll let . . .

BLACKADDER: He'll let? You'll let? Your reign is
done:

You've queened it long enough: I'm mistress now:
And don't you dare to turn your tongue on me—
Nay, nor your eyes: you cannot play the witch
On me: my eye's a match for any eye.
I'm nothing daunted by an old wife's glower;
So, save your evil eye for scaring bairns,
And screwing sixpences from nowts in trousers.

RED ROWAN: A sump of puddled ash! Yet, in my
day . . .

Hark, jezebel: your fire is bonnie enough;
But you'll burn out someday: and then you'll find
What men are.

BLACKADDER: Happen: but while I burn, I'll burn:
And men may find they're only faggots to feed
My fire.

RED ROWAN: Ay, ay; and so I thought at your age.
My eye was once as bright, my breasts as full . . .

BLACKADDER: And as for women . . . Oh, but you
have ridden

Us wenches hard, and lashed us with your tongue:
But I'm in the saddle now—your turn to smart!
I've slutted for you long: but I'm no bairn now

For you to bray half-silly with your neave .

WEAZEL Who bangs the bairn must aye look out
for bangs

When the hempy's old enough to handle the broom-
stick

BLACKADDER When you've an arm like mine, old
spindleshanks,

Then you can make me do your bidding now
You'll slut for me and as for Weazel .

WEAZEL Ay,

Blackadder is the silly for my money

RED ROWAN Well, if you're set on breaking your
old neck

Riding Black Beauty to the devil, no use
For me to waste my wind I'd better leave you
To manage her yourself, and wish you joy
I'll just turn in, for I've no mind to clarty
My manners, *swapping compliments with such*
A muckhut

BLACKADDER So?

SLIM JIM The queen is dead long live .

HARHFELS I'm blasted if I'll

WEAZEL Not a doubt of it

But keep it to yourself, unless you want
To hoof it Let Blackadder tip the wink
She doesn't like your language, and you'll scoot.

RED ROWAN The poor, blind dobbie!

NETTLE Well, anyway, he's master,
Though we've got a brand-new mistress, seemingly
But she needn't think she's going to boss

WEAZEL You'll do

Blackadder's bidding.

NETTLE: I'll . . .

WEAZEL: You'll take your hook—

You and Hareheels, if I've another word

From either.

RED ROWAN: Kiss the dust, the pair of you ;

And let her trample . . .

SLIM JIM: Time, grannie, you were creeping

Into your lonesome bed : and don't forget

To say your prayers.

RED ROWAN: I'll save my breath : you're all

Past praying for.

SLIM JIM: Good-night, and sweet repose,

And it's all the bed to-night, and all the clothes !

WEAZEL: You young folk are too hard. A little
chaff

Hurts no one, but . . .

(WEAZEL breaks off, with a shake of the head, as
RED ROWAN climbs into the cart, and dis-
appears behind the curtain of the tilt. A
moment after ALBERT EDWARD HIGGS, a
podgy tramp, enters stealthily behind the
company round the fire, unnoticed. He
stands eyeing the group, and looking round
the camp : then, snuffing the fumes from the
pot with relish, he speaks, as if to himself, in
a soft, wheezy voice.)

ALBERT EDWARD: And such a lovely mare !

(They all turn their heads to look up at him : but he
still stands with rapt eyes, as if contemplat-
ing something at a distance. His back is to

the cart. Presently, a corner of the tilt is lifted, and RED ROWAN peers out at the unconscious tramp)

WEAZFL Hullo! What's this?

NETTLE Blackadder, here's your callant

Come galloping to you on Shanks's mare

WEAZEL Ay, that's about the only nag, I'd wager,
He's any knowledge of

ALBERT EDWARD These blinking eyes
Never saw the like of her

NETTLE Blackadder?

ALBERT EDWARD Style!

And, as for action—talk of Rotten Row!

WEAZFL What's the old geezer gabbing about?

ALBERT EDWARD A spanker!

The king's coach-horses aren't in it

WEAZEL Squat, old sport;

And let us know what maggot's worrying you

ALBERT EDWARD Such form—such elegance! And
to be had

Just for the shipping of a knot

WEAZEL (*starting to his feet*) What's that?

Speak up, old gent

(The others rise quietly, and cluster about the tramp)

ALBERT EDWARD To think she might be mine,
If only I had been a younger man,
And not so portly, not so like my namesake—
The Albert Edwards seem to run to fat,
Although my mother was no Queen Victoria,
No feather-bed

WEAZEL: But where's the bonnie mare?

ALBERT EDWARD: Tied to a post outside . . . O
vanished youth!

To think because a few short years have combed
My golden curls out, and destroyed my figure,
I must lose such a prize! The price she'd fetch
At Tattersall's!

WEAZEL: Why can't you speak out plain,
And tell . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: And all because of gout and
asthma!

Genteel complaints, and in the family—
My father was a martyr . . .

WEAZEL: Devil take
Your father and you, if you . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Oh, my poor breath!
And her sot of a master, lying like a log,
Blind-drunk and helpless.

HAREHEELS: Look here, old broken bellows,
If you don't tell us, and sharp . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: You fluster me,
The lot of you. I might be an accident,
The way you all keep crowding round and shoving.
Move further off; and let me get my breath.
How can I tell . . . But it's not only my bellows
That's broken, but my heart, to think of her
Left with that drunken brute.

BLACKADDER: Come, stow that gammon,
Or something else of yours will soon be broken.

ALBERT EDWARD: Lady, you understand? A woman's
heart . . .

BLACKADDER A woman's hand will take you by the neck,

And snap it like a kex, if you don't tell us

Where 'twas you saw the mare Come, jerk it out!

ALBERT EDWARD It's been a weakness with me all my life

I don't regret it, but I never could

Refuse a lady Such a pair of eyes—

Black diamonds!

BLACKADDER You leave my eyes alone.

ALBERT EDWARD My mother had black eyes I've always had

A tender spot

SLIM JIM

You'll have a tenderer spot,
And black eyes like your mother, into the bargain,
If you don't tell us

ALBERT EDWARD Who's addressing you?
I'm talking with this lady Can't we have
A little tête-a-tête, but you barge in
With your coarse notions?

BLACKADDER (*teizing ALBERT EDWARD by the collar*)

Gox, I'll tatertate you!

Just spit it out, or I'll . . .

ALBERT EDWARD

Oh, my poor breath!

Such sudden affection at my time of life

Is more than I Restrain yourself, my dear.

BLACKADDER You windywallops! I'll twist your . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Patience, patience!

If there's one fault the gentle sex has Ow!

You're choking me, my love!

BLACKADDER

I'll throttle you

Where is that mare?

ALBERT EDWARD (*gasping*): Outside *The Travellers' Rest*.

(BLACKADDER releases him, and WEAZEL and SLIM JIM begin to move off down the road.)

ALBERT EDWARD: Now I can breathe. But where are you two off to?

WEAZEL (*stopping and turning*): To fetch the mare for you.

ALBERT EDWARD: Now that's real kind—
Christian, I call it. It's not every day
I come across real gentlemen—going off,
Without a word, to do a kindly deed.
But do you think two'll manage? Hadn't someone
Better drop in to have a drink, and keep
The landlord busy, while the other two . . .
Though doubtless, you know best, I'll just sit down,
And get my wind to entertain the ladies
While you're away. My poor heart's palpitating.
A hug like that at my age! I'm not used . . .
Though I can't blame the wench: she's not the first
That's cottoned up to Albert Edward Higgs.
So, I'll just take things easy, till you bring
My mare for me.

(The tramp sits down by the fire with his back to the cart, still unconscious of RED ROWAN's eye watching him.)

WEAZEL (to HAREHEELS, who makes as if to accompany them): You needn't come: we'll manage.

HAREHEELS: You fancy I'd trust you two!

BLACKADDER : I'm coming as well .

I couldn't trust that mare with any man.

NETTLE If she's to go, I'll not be left behind—
Though it's not the mare I cannot trust with men.

WEAZEL Now, have some sense It's just a one-
horse-show

And when I go to view a mare, I'm not
For travelling with a gairishon You'll give
The game away, among you—such a gang
And, anyway, we can't all go and leave

ALBERT EDWARD Don't worry about me you needn't
stand

On ceremony with me I'm not the sort
Easily takes offence and I'll just snooze

BLACKADDER He's safe enough, the wheezy saveloy!
I could settle him, single-handed He'll not bolt

WEAZEL (*catching sight of RED ROWAN's eye peering
from under the tilt*) He'd better not try it on, if
I'm a judge

But such a gang! Though you two wenches might
Be cracking with the company in the bar,
While we . . .

ALBERT EDWARD The very thing! Who'd have a
thought

For mares, while two such charmers It's my loss
But I must try and bear up while you're away
And keep an eye on things

WEAZEL Only an eye
If you lay as much as a finger on the gear,
You'll not be portly when we've done with you

*(They steal out in single file, leaving the tramp
stretched out by the fire with his eyes closed.
When they are well out of hearing, he sits*

up, and winks: then rises briskly and looks cautiously round. By the time his eyes reach the cart, RED ROWAN has dropped the curtain of the tilt, and disappeared from sight.)

ALBERT EDWARD: What ho! The coast is clear, and all serene!

To it, my hearties! Once aboard the lugger . . .
A mile and a half, at least, to *The Travellers' Rest*.
I'll just have time for a snack, and a look about me
To see if there's aught worth picking up—not much
Of a Tommy Tiddler's ground, by the looks of it:
But you never know what you'll find in a coper's cart:
They've a knack of raking in queer odds and ends,
Knocking about the country. I've been surprised
Before to-day. I may have struck it lucky.

(He picks up a plate and spoon from the ground, and helps himself to stew from the pot. As he does so, with his back to the cart, RED ROWAN unhooks the canvas curtain of the tilt, which drops down silently: then sits, motionless, under the dark arch, like an alabaster idol, her grizzled hair on her shoulders, and her eyes fixed on the tramp's back.)

ALBERT EDWARD: Hare, by the sniff of it: I've always had

A weakness for jugged hare. Damn it, it's hot!
Well, I'll just set it down to cool a bit,
While I look round. Ow! but I've got the shivers;
And there's cold water trickling down my spine:
I must have caught a chill—these frosty nights . . .
Now for the lugger, to see . . .

(Turning his head, he catches sight of RED
 ROWAN She does not stir or speak, but
 sits with eyes fixed on him)

ALBERT EDWARD What ho, she bumps '
 (Recovering himself) Your pardon, lady—I thought I
 was alone.

I'm the new cook, just tasting the stew to see .
 Another pinch of salt, or half a pinch,
 If you would kindly hand me out the saltbox
 And a dash of pepper wouldn't come amiss
 But, blimey, am I talking to a lady,
 Or Cleopatra's mummy? It's a waxwork,
 For sure no lady could have held her tongue
 So long I'm always sorry for wax ladies
 In shows, or smirking in the barbers' windows—
 And they, without a tongue to wag But, lordy,
 To think I should be scared by two glass eyes '
 I once glanced over my shoulder, and saw an owl
 Glaring down on me just so—I don't like owls,
 Their eyes, or voices I've heard too much of them
 These last few nights it gets into your blood
 And curdles it, that screeching—and when the eyes
 Moved Higgs, your nerves aren't what they were,
 my boy
 It's time you lay up in your winter-quarters
 These hills and foggy nights Why, you'll be
 seeing
 Ghosts, and mistaking owls for witches next,
 If you can't look a waxwork in the eyes
 (RE ROWAN moves her eyes slowly round The
 tra. & starts)

There was no blinking image.

A blinking image?

But I mistook you . . .

Your lucky !

RED ROWAN: Once aboard . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Only a favourite wheeze—you know it? "Once

Aboard the lugger, and the girl is mine!"

RED ROWAN (*climbing down from the cart*): She is.

ALBERT EDWARD (*stepping back*): She is?

RED ROWAN: The girl is yours.

ALBERT EDWARD: O lordy!

You never thought I meant. . . . It's just a saying—

Gammon, you know. I've always had a turn

For poetry ; and everybody knows

It's all-my-eye-and-Betty-Martin.

RED ROWAN: Nay:

Nothing I ken of Betty: but I ken

When you leave here, I'm going with you.

ALBERT EDWARD

Blimey!

You never mean .

RED ROWAN

I mean just what I'm saying.

ALBERT EDWARD

You wouldn't quit .

RED ROWAN

I'm going to be a quitter,

Before I'm quitted

ALBERT EDWARD I see—been having words?

Was it with young black-eyes?

RED ROWAN

The jezebel!

She, telling fortunes , and buying neckerchiefs

For men who are old enough to be her granddad!

ALBERT EDWARD Plain'r and plainer! Love and
Jealousy,

May and December, or The Old Man's Darling

A Drama of High Life, in penny numbers?

RED ROWAN Me—jealous of thon jezebel!

ALBERT EDWARD

Come, come,

Old lady, don't take on so

RED ROWAN

Who are you calling

Old lady? You're no two-year old, yourself

Old lady, indeed!

ALBERT EDWARD A ship! But what art words?

Just wind, and soon blow over. You and black-
eyes

Will make it up, and you'll be bosom-friends

Before you know

RED ROWAN

Ay, it will need to be

Before I know

Where are you bound for, Stumpy?

ALBERT EDWARD

My winter-quarters I can't stand
the North

In winter it's too chilly, and too creepy.

We winter in the South: I'm the last swallow—
The last rose of summer left blooming alone . . .

RED ROWAN: And where . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: My lovely companions all faded . . .

RED ROWAN: Where may be . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: My winter-quarters? Why, in
London, of course—

Whitechapel way: my Park Lane house is let
For the season to Ikey . . .

RED ROWAN: London?

ALBERT EDWARD: Where ever else

Could any gentleman winter?

RED ROWAN: That will do:

I've always had a fancy to live in London.

We may as well be stepping.

ALBERT EDWARD: You're not serious?

You're gammoning—just kidding me? You can't

Pull Albert Edward's leg, or Higgs's either.

You never mean . . .

RED ROWAN: Where you go, I go too.

ALBERT EDWARD: Well, I'll be hanged!

RED ROWAN: Likely; but I'll not promise

To follow you further than the gallows' foot:

But short of that, you'll not escape . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: You fancy

I'd saddle myself with a hag?

RED ROWAN (*eyeing him with a smile*): A what?

ALBERT EDWARD: Blue murder!

Don't look at me like that—those eyes . . .

RED ROWAN: A what?

ALBERT EDWARD: Pardon, a slip!

For hanging, there'd be nothing left to hang

ALBERT EDWARD Stop it, old lady!

RED ROWAN Don't old lady me!

But I'll not let you hide yourself in gaol

Till Weazel's wrung your neck, and Slim Jim's
jabbed

Your jaw, and Hareheels clog-danced on your
chest,

Scrunching your ribs like faggots—crackle, crackle.

Ay, and Blackadder . . .

ALBERT EDWARD Mercy! Draw it mild!

RED ROWAN Mild, did you say? That's only
mother's milk

To what I'll make you swallow I could blister

Your thrapple with a dose . . .

ALBERT EDWARD I've had enough;

I've never been a soaker—always known

The time to stop and I meant no offence

RED ROWAN Nor I, but I am going to travel with
you

I won't bide here, and let thou jezebel

Badger and bullyrag me all day long

And Weazel, he would leave me in the ditch

To die, as like as not—and he, new-fangled

With every fresh red flannel-petticoat

Catches his eye! And winter coming on

The frosts go through my bones now like cold
needles,

Turning the marrow to ice and I've a notion

To winter betwixt four walls I'm getting on—

Too old for the road, it seems I never fancied

The fire'd burn out to ashes. Let him mind
He doesn't scorch his fingers with his new flame—
The black-eyed jezebel! I'm sick to death
Of the whole gangrel crew.

*(The tramp has stolen behind her, and tries to
sidle off, unnoticed.)*

You'd sneak away
Without me, would you? But my eye is on you,
Although I've got my back to you.

ALBERT EDWARD (*stopping*): No, no—
I only meant . . . I wouldn't dream of going
Without you.

RED ROWAN: Nay, you'll never dream again
Without my knowing all that's in your mind,
My bonnie birkie. When you sleep, my eye
Will burrow, a red maggot, in your brain,
Eating your thoughts up—ay, and starving on them.
But come, we'd best be making ourselves scarce,
Before they're back, unless you'd rather wait?

ALBERT EDWARD: Well, if it's a choice between . . .

RED ROWAN: No choice for you:
Though you'd scarce be worth the taking, when they'd
finished.

Poor company, a rackle of broken bones!
Weazel will miss me.

ALBERT EDWARD: Miss you! ay, who wouldn't?

RED ROWAN: You're coming, Stumpy? Well, we'd
best step out.

ALBERT EDWARD: Ay, if it must be "we": but isn't
there

A dowry with the lady—a spoon or so?

A little property won't come amiss. (*Looking round*)
Now in that cart?

RED ROWAN Haven't you had enough
Out of the cart? You said, you'd been surprised
Before to day

ALBERT EDWARD Never! And, what is more,
I'll never be surprised again in this life

RED ROWAN You can't be sure, until I've done with
you

We're just beginning life together I've still
A trick or two up my sleeve might startle you
But we'll not take a spoon with us if we did,
They'd follow us, for certain

ALBERT EDWARD Right you are

RED ROWAN You're learning sense and right I'll
be for you

Until you're snug between the coffin-boards
And even then, you'll not escape my eye—
A red-hot gimlet, worming through the deal

ALBERT EDWARD Oh, don't start that again it
isn't nice—

And me with chronic asthma, and a heart.

RED ROWAN Your asthma and my rheumatics
should keep pace,

And jog along together cannily

ALBERT EDWARD Albert, you're hooked - Edward,
you're hooked and Higgs,

You're hooked and landed Vell, jump up, old
girl,

Behind me on the mare

RED ROWAN

The mare?

ALBERT EDWARD (*starting off*): Ay, Shanks's.
There never was a lovelier mare—such action,
Such elegance!

RED ROWAN (*following*): I little dreamt I'd come
To hoof it with a gaberlunzie-man!

BLACKADDER

PERSONS

HAREHEELS }
SLIM JIM } *horse-copers*

BLACKADDER

NETTLE.

JACK BENSON, *a disabled soldier*

BLACKADDER

SCENE : *A horse-copers' camp by a Border-stream, on a fine Spring morning. The camp fire is dying out : and the muggers' cart, with its canvas tilt, is packed for travelling. HAREHEELS and SLIM JIM are polishing harness : and BLACKADDER is washing breakfast-dishes in the stream. NETTLE, with a shawl over her head and carrying a large market-basket over her arm, comes from behind the cart ; and, shuffling towards BLACKADDER, stands looking down on her sullenly.*

BLACKADDER (*looking up*) : Well ?

NETTLE : Don't you dare say "well" to me like that.

BLACKADDER : Like what ?

NETTLE : Like what—I'll let you see like what. I'll teach you I'm not clarts beneath your clogs.

BLACKADDER : What's wrong ?

NETTLE : What's wrong ? You well may ask what's wrong :

You'll soon find out ; and I can tell you this much
To keep you going—you may as tite know now :
This is the last time I'll run errands for you.

BLACKADDER : For me ?

NETTLE :

Ay,

Now Weazel's buried, Hareheels has a mind
To take you back : and he's the master now.

BLACKADDER : You've settled it ?

NETTLE :

Not I : I'm not the sort

To settle things for men : I'd never snatch
The reins from menfolk's hands : but one thing's
certain—

We're none of us, from this on, going to do
The bidding of a petticoat.

BLACKADDER :

I see.

NETTLE : Hareheels and Jim . . .

BLACKADDER :

The three of you have put

Your noddles together, trying to make one head ?

(*Calling*) Hareheels !

(HAREHEELS *goes on polishing without taking
any notice.*)

NETTLE (*to HAREHEELS*) : Now don't you hear her
majesty ?

Jump to it, lad !

HAREHEELS : I'll come when I've a mind to.

BLACKADDER : Hareheels, it's time you took the mare
to get

That hind shoe seen to.

HAREHEELS (*rising and slouching forward*) : Who are
you ordering ?

BLACKADDER : You'll soon find out.

HAREHEELS :

Not I, my lass : it's you

Will do the finding out. I'm master now,
As Nettle says ; and I'll not let my doxy
Be bossing me. By gox, I've stood enough

BLACKADDER: It seems that Slim Jim kens his place :
he's wise.

SLIM JIM: Nay, but I'm with them : and no petti-
coat . . .

BLACKADDER: Well, you've both got your lesson off
pat, good boys!

No petticoat? You've given up your trousers
To Nettle, you and Hareheels? Well, she's welcome
To the brace of you : it leaves me free.

NETTLE: You slut—
You radgy slut!

HAREHEELS: Nay, leave the wench to me.
I'll break her yet: I'll take my way with her.
She'll learn that she's a woman—I'm a man.
Free! She'll soon find out what her freedom's worth,
If she tries on her tricks!

BLACKADDER (*regarding him steadily*): You take the
mare.

NETTLE: You'll do her bidding, Hareheels?

HAREHEELS (*turning*): Well, that shoe
Wants seeing to: I may as tite . . .

BLACKADDER: And you
Be off, before . . .

NETTLE (*moving*): I'd scorn to stay and talk
With such . . . but it's the last time, mind you.

BLACKADDER: Happen
But where is Slim Jim off to?

NETTLE: What's that to you?
And mayn't I take my man to carry my basket
Without your leave? Likely, I'd trust you two
Alone together.

JACK : Where are your eyes,
You cannot see I've swapped my leg for a touch
Of fever?

BLACKADDER: Fever?

JACK (*sitting down*): Ay, it's not only the cold
That makes me dother: it's malaria—
The swagger name they give it, to make you proud
You've not got common ague. You've to travel
To get malaria, while poor stay-at-homes . . .

BLACKADDER : Come, sup this, lad : 'twill warm your bones a bit.
You're ailing, surely ?

JACK : So you have an eye?
A pair of them : I don't know when I saw
A bonnier pair !

BLACKADDER: You've been to Africa?
What were you after?

JACK: Pleasure, mistress, pleasure—
A little shooting-party with some friends.

BLACKADDER: Shooting?

JACK: Ay, potting Boers, or being potted:
That's how I lost my leg.

BLACKADDER : So, you're a soldier ?

JACK: A soldier—nay, a has-been—just a relic
Of a death-or-glory-boy. I dodged the death,
And got the glory: that's what makes me fat.

BLACKADDER: You're just a scarecrow.

JACK : No such blooming luck !
A boggart has no belly—and his clothes,
All found for him ; and he doesn't need to hobble
On his lone shank about the countryside.

BLACKADDER You've been to Africa—you've seen the world?

JACK I've seen the world—ay, more than enough of it

And as for Africa

BLACKADDER You've crossed the sea?

JACK Ay, for my sins, I have

BLACKADDER And fought with men?

JACK With men? With hills a hundred miles away
And they returned the compliment, they did—
Sent me a sappy one, with kind regards,
No answer needed knocked me out, whizz-bang!
Splintered the twin of this fine leg—a pair,
A lovely pair, they were—a trifle bowed
With riding, but such calves, first-prize bull calves.

BLACKADDER Ay, your poor leg

JACK Well, I've survived the loss
And, as things are, happen it's just as well
I haven't two to fatten Crutches, mistress,
Don't need much blowing out

BLACKADDER You're naught but bones

JACK And aching bones, at that I've hobbled it
This twelve-month, dot and-carry-one, till I'm .

BLACKADDER You're starved but you'll not need to
starve again
Nor hobble another inch

JACK Jehoshaphat!

You mean . . . You haven't a knife about you, mistress,
To slit my thrapple? It wouldn't be worth while
To do me in I didn't strike the diamonds—
Nay, nor a gold mine out in Africa

(BLACKADDER does not answer ; but stands gazing with an abstracted air into the fire. Some time has passed, when SLIM JIM and NETTLE return with the basket, followed by HAREHEELS with the mare, which he puts into the shafts of the cart.)

NETTLE : That's the last errand.

BLACKADDER : Not for you to say.

NETTLE : Nor you.

BLACKADDER : Nor me.

HAREHEELS : You've learnt your lesson, have you ?
You've found your master ?

BLACKADDER : Ay, I've found my master.

NETTLE (laughing) : You've tamed her, Hareheels.

Well, I've always held
Men should be masters. Still, I should have judged
She'd have made a bit of a fight for it.

BLACKADDER : Less noise :
You'll waken him.

NETTLE : Waken ? Who the devil . . .

BLACKADDER : Your master.

NETTLE : Hareheels ? But he's not sleeping.

BLACKADDER : I said naught
Of Hareheels.

NETTLE : Well, who else . . .

BLACKADDER : He's in the cart ;
And wants to sleep.

NETTLE : He's in the cart. . . . Not Weazel—
Don't say it's Weazel ! But I saw him straked
And chested, and . . .

BLACKADDER : Your master's in the cart.

NETTLE Don't tell me Weazel's walking! I can't
bide

To think of ghosts

HAREHEELS Ghosts—who's afraid of ghosts?

NETTLE She says that Weazel's ghost's . .

HAREHEELS Come back to have

His throat slit, likely? Well

BLACKADDER I said your master

Was in the cart.

HAREHEELS Her master?

BLACKADDER. Ay, and yours

And ghost or not

*(BLACKADDER breaks off, as she sees the face of
the soldier peeping out beneath the canvas.*

*SLIM JIM has now come up, and he and
HAREHEELS and NETTLE, following the
direction of BLACKADDER's eyes, stare at the
cart in amazement.)*

NETTLE Preserve us!

HAREHEELS What the devil!

SLIM JIM Thon's no ghost.

JACK No, chum, you're right it seems I'm not a
ghost,

Although I fancied . . . But, if this is heaven,

It's hanky-panky about angels' wings.

Or you're newcomers, like myself, and haven't

Begun to sprout .

HAREHEELS. You just hop out of that!

NETTLE So that's the master, your new fancy-man?

HAREHEELS By gox, I'll settle him!

BLACKADDER Dare lay a finger . . .

JACK : Now no unpleasantness—I wouldn't have
Unpleasantness on my account. The lady
Just kindly offered me a lift.

HAREHEELS : I'll lift you !
If you don't . . .

JACK : Well, you'll have to lift me, mate :
It's more than I can manage with one leg.

BLACKADDER (*to HAREHEELS*) : You dare !

JACK : Nay, mistress, I've no mind to stop
Where I'm not wanted.

HAREHEELS (*helping him out of the cart*) : Well, you've
got some sense.

NETTLE : That, the new master, your new fancy-man—
Thon shivering, one-legged bag-of-bones !

BLACKADDER : You dare !

NETTLE : Thon's the braw callant—— Oh, I mind,
I mind,

Your blathering, the night Red Rowan left,
About a braw young callant, galloping
To swing you to his saddle. Well, you're welcome
To him : though, likely, Hareheels has a word
To say to him.

HAREHEELS : I cannot slit the gullet
Of thon lame scarecrow.

NETTLE : And you'd let Blackadder . . .

HAREHEELS : I'm through with her, if thon's the sort
she fancies—

Old daffling dobbies, and hirpling tattie-jacks.

(*He lifts the basket and the dishes into the cart.*)

NETTLE : You're done with her ? And a good riddance
too.

I wish her callant joy . . .

SLIM JIM . . . You hold your gob

Blackadder, are you coming ?

BLACKADDER . . . I'm not coming

SLIM JIM You'd bide with . . . Well, it's no affair of mine

(HAREHEELS moves off with the cart and horse ; and

SLIM JIM and NETTLE follow down the road)

JACK God save our gracious ! It seems we're left.

BLACKADDER . . . We're left

JACK Babes in the wood, like—though I see no robins

And I must own I like the wicked uncles

Better than auntie.

BLACKADDER . . . Nettle, you mean ?

JACK . . . She would be

Yet, bless her heart, she didn't put it badly—

A shivering, one-legged bag-of-bones, that's me,

Jack Benson to a T—a speaking likeness,

And no charge made ! Well, I've long had a mind

To marry and settle down . . . I'm tired of travelling ;

Though I little guessed . . . We never know our luck !

And, happen, you're a fancy to settle ?

BLACKADDER . . . Settle !

WINTER'S STOB

PERSONS

NEBBY PETER, *an old drover*

CURLY DODD } *young drovers*

SPANKER ORD }

WINTER'S STOB

SCENE : *Winter's Stob on a Spring morning. A flock of sheep comes up the road from the direction of Morpeth; CURLY DODD walking in front of them, and NEBBY PETER following.*

NEBBY (*calling*) : Hi, lad !

CURLY (*stopping and turning his head*) : What's wrong ?

NEBBY : I'm going to rest my shanks.

CURLY : So early ?

NEBBY : Ay, it's well enough for you,
With your young bones : but when they've travelled as far

As mine . . .

CURLY : I've come as far.

NEBBY : This morning, ay :
But this is not the first I've walked the world.

CURLY : Nor I.

NEBBY : Oh, you're Methuselah, you are—
The Wandering Jew ! How many centuries,
May I make bold to ask, have you been traiking,
Since you first set out from Jerusalem ?

CURLY : Who are you getting at ? And I'm no Jew—
More like a Jew yourself, with thon hooked neb.

NEBBY : Better a half-moon than a button-mushroom,

If we're for swapping compliments on noses.
 And Jews—well, they're not mongrels, anyhow
 They're all pure-bred and devil only kens
 What boggart got you on a worn-out besom—
 Born upon Guy Fawkes' Day and all, I'd fancy.
 But whether or no, I'm going to squat right here

(NEBBY sits down under Winter's Stob The
 sheep spread out, and start grazing on
 either side of the road)

CURLY (looking up at the Stob) 'Thon's a queer sign-
 post, with no word upon it,
 And pointing down no road

NEBBY It's pointing straight
 The road you're travelling hotfoot, son

CURLY What road?

NEBBY The road to hell

CURLY To hell, yourself!

NEBBY If you

Don't sprag that tongue, you'll find it's taken you
 The journey at a jump But sure enough,
 A gey queer signpost, and it's called a stob

CURLY A stob—what's that?

NEBBY A gibbet, son

CURLY A gibbet?

NEBBY Where ever were you reared and educated,
 That you don't ken a gibbet when you see one?
 Next, you'll be kidding me you never heard
 Of William Winter

CURLY Well, I never did

NEBBY The ignorance of young folk, nowadays!
 He was a murderer, and dangled there

NEBBY Ay, 'twas his heelplates did for him.
 The day before, he'd squatted by the road
 With his two doxits, as you're doing now,
 With hoofs stuck out for all the world to see
 And a passing herd-lad, with an eye in his head,
 Noted the pretty pattern of his heelplates
 And when they found the snow about Haws Pale
 Printed with the same pattern, William Winter
 Was done for—corpse-cold as his name already,
 Though little guessing it himself, where he
 Was swilling old Peg's savings with his wenches.

CURLY To think his heelplates . . .

NEBBY Likely enough they were
 The very pattern of your own Since then
 It's only innocents and wattikins
 Have sported heelplates You've left a lovely print
 Of yours in every patch of clarts we've crossed
 Since we quitted Morpeth

CURLY Strike me blue! By gox!
*(He takes out his jack-knife, and begins hacking
 off his heelplates)*

NEBBY Too late to hack them off—though, likely
 enough,
 The trotters have saved you—it's well you went before:
 'Twould take a sharp-eyed 'tec to pick out footprints
 When five-score ewes have paddled over them.
 But let it be a lesson to you, son
 You thought yourself so swanky with braw heelplates.
 And Winter turned his up for all to see,
 And he was taken by the heels It's swagger
 That's many a man's undoing. and some day . .

NEBBY : Nor any lad,

CURLY: What is't you're getting at?

We mayn't all carry murder in our pockets,
But all of us have got it in our hearts :
And some folk shouldn't trust themselves with knives.
I'd an eye on you, my lad, when Spanker Ord
Linked arms and walked off with your wench last night.

NEBBY: Just so—just so!

You'd have done the trick last night, if he'd not been
Just twice your size : and, one day, you'll chance on him
In a dark lane, or sleeping in a ditch :
And then it won't be hacking off your heelplates
Will save you from Newcastle—and all for what ?
A wench who'll link up with another lad
Because he's got it over you in inches,
Or wears a gaudier neckerchief : it's such
Bring most men to the gallows : they're the heelplates
Lads sport so swankily to their undoing.
Even if William Winter'd gone scot-free
That time, he couldn't have escaped the hangman.
What other end could any man expect
Who travels with two doxies ? Ay, my son,
You judge you ken all there's to know of women,
As I did at your age : but mark my words,
No man is safe till he knows all, and more :

And I'm still learning, at three-score-and-ten
 If you don't keep that jack-knife clasped, and clean
 For cutting bread and cheese—that's what it's for—
 Not cutting out folk's livers

CURLY

And who said

I wanted to cut out anyone's ?

NFRRI

You said it—

Not with your tongue but you've a pair of eyes
 Are tell-tale-tits, and they'd be evidence
 Enough to damn you to the blindest bats
 That ever crammed a jury-box You've got
 A speaking countenance, as they call it, son.
 Ay, and that flush!—best keep that fire damped
 down,

My fighting cock, if you'd not kindle hell—
 Or anyway, until you meet the woman
 Who'll teach you, son, all womenfolk aren't strumpets.
 And she'll not rouse the murder in your heart
 I learnt that early, just about your age,
 And that's why I have reached three-score and-ten
 You follow the draggie-tails of that young hizzig,
 You'll hang for her, but leave her to six-foot-three,
 And 'twill be Spanker kicks his heels in air
 For doing in her latest fancy-man,
 Who'll, happen, wear brass ear-rings, or sport a waist-
 coat

With pearlie buttons—I've known scarlet braces
 Tempt that sort to go tramping with a tinker
 Son, I was sitting on this very spot,
 A year back, when I heard a hubblyshew
 Far overhead, and squinting up, I saw

Two sparrowhawks at grips, with feathers flying,
And claws locked in each other's breasts. Thinks I,
So that's the game; and looked out for the hen:
And sure enough, I spotted her on yon crag,
Looking on, calm as calm: when another cock,
Scenting the battle, likely, swaggered up:
And off she sailed with him, as the fighters dropped,
One dead, the other with a broken wing.
If you and Spanker ever come to grips,
I've a shrewd notion which will fare the worse:
And sure as fate, the better man will find
The best has bagged his bird while he's been scrapping.
Yet, womenfolk aren't all hawks: and I'd the luck
To learn that early. But I'm wasting wind.
What a lad's to learn of women, he can learn
Only from women: and you've had a lesson
From one sort . . . (*as CURLY springs suddenly to his
feet*). What the devil are you up to?

CURLY (*looking down the road*): Spanker, by gox!

NEBBY: Spanker it is, no less.
Just hand me out that gully, Curly, lad.

CURLY: I'm damned . . .

NEBBY: That's so, if you're forgetting Winter.

(*CURLY takes the knife from his pocket and
tosses it to NEBBY, without a word.*)

NEBBY (*pocketing the knife*): That's that: and now
you squat. It's not polite,
And, what's more to the purpose, none too safe,
To stand there gaping, when a gentleman
Like Spanker's walking with his doxy.

CURLY (*sitting down*): Nay,

'There's no one with him

NEBBY

Well, my eyes are not

The eyes they were. And so he walks alone?

Ay, now I see and judging from his looks,

You might have kept your knife

CURLY

We'd best be moving.

NENNY Nay, till we know, you're safer on your bunkers

And what's your hurry, just when there's a chance

Of pleasant company? You're well enough

For common days, but then, to-day's my birthday—

Just seventy-year, to-day, since first I opened

'This mug, to give my mammy some advice;

And I'm still wasting good advice on you

And I've been used to parties on my birthday.

I'm fond of company I ken they say

"Three's none" but that depends, and for my part

I've always found three makes things livelier.

Though, happen, it's a stretch to speak of Spanker

As company, outside a coffin-shop—

Lord, what an undertaker there was lost.

When hangdog took to droving! Not the crony

I'd choose, maybe but, on the road, you've got

Just to put up with aught that comes along

Ay, and not only on the road—the world's

A lodging-house that takes all sorts of lodgers,

And even in the dosshouse in the basement

We'll not be able to pick our company

(SPANER ORD draws near—a lanky, dour-looking man. He is walking with his head down.

and doesn't see NEBBY and CURLY as he strides by.)

NEBBY : Hi, Spanker ! What's your hurry ? Who is dying

Just for one glimpse of thon bright smile of yours ?

SPANKER (*stopping and turning round*) : You, is it ?

NEBBY : Ay. You took it for the voice Of Winter's ghost ?

SPANKER (*seeing CURLY*) : And you !

NEBBY : Ay, Curly's with me This journey. He it was who kenned you first. I couldn't make out what it was that sparkled Along the road just like a looking-glass, If looking-glasses could go gallivanting, When Curly says : " It's Spanker !" and I said : " Spanker, it is ; and bless his sunny smile."

SPANKER : You hold your gob.

NEBBY : It's yours that wants the holding, By the looks of it ; but, if you've got the toothache, You've come to the right shop : a splinter of wood From Winter's Stob is warranted to cure . . .

SPANKER : Toothache be damned !

NEBBY : I'm with you there, my friend. The things I've suffered from my teeth—the fuss They made, coming and going—couldn't stay To see me through, they couldn't. But Spanker, boy, Where is your lady-friend ?

SPANKER : My lady-friend ?

NEBBY : Thon wench . . .

SPANKER : Damn all . . .

NEBBY : Nay, now you go too far.

Damn anything in reason, and I'm with you
 But all . . . Why, mate, where ever should we be
 Without the ladies? And you didn't seem
 Last night to be . . . You've not deserted her,
 Thon blue-eyed lass—and she without a mammy?
 Shame on you, Spanker I'd thought better of you!
 How you've the heart to leave thon innocent
 To cry her eyes out for

SPANKER

Deserted her!

She, crying for me!

NEBBY

Who wouldn't?

SPANKER

Gox, she'll cry

Before I've done with her!

(Turns to go)

NEBBY

Where are you off to?

SPANKER After her

NEBBY

What, she's left you?

SPANKER

Ay, she's left me

NEBBY Now, how can I believe that?

SPANKER

It's God's truth—

Left me this morning for a bloody mugger

NEBBY A mugger? Nay—now, if you'd said a
 marquis,

I might have

SPANKER Sloped off with him in his cart,
 While I was sleeping but I'm on their track.

NEBBY So ho, my sleuth-hound, nosing on the scent!
 Brass ear-rings and a pair of scarlet braces,
 I'll warrant. Hard it is a handsome man
 Like you can't hold them without titivating
 But that's the way with women—got to wash
 To humour them, even if you are a duke

So they eloped : and you are following them :
That's why you're travelling without sheep ? A man
Looks such a fool without a flock before him.
You're tracking them ? You don't, by any chance,
Wear heelplates, Spanker ?

SPANKER : Heelplates ? What the devil . . .
You're going dotty—and I'll go dotty, too . . .

NEBBY : Not far for you to travel.

SPANKER : If I stand here,
Chin-wagging : and I'll lose the track of them.

(SPANKER *sets off, half-running.*)

NEBBY : And never even wished me "happy returns"—
Though, likely, it's I should have been wishing him . . .
Toothache ! It's not a splinter from a gibbet
Will cure his ache, but the gallows' rope itself.
Yet I can't argue with every loony that's set
On running his head in a noose : and anyway,
With jobs that scarce, it isn't fair to the hangman :
He's got his brats to keep in bread and butter.
We'd best be moving, too.

CURLY (*rising*) : Give me my gully.

NEBBY (*getting up with difficulty*) :
Ow ! growing-pains ! Give you . . . I'm not aware
I've anything of yours about me, son.

CURLY : You thief, you !

NEBBY : Oh, you mean the knife you swapt
For my advice ? You'll never get that back
Until you've given me advice as useful,
And saved my neck. I'm no philanthropist :
When I want naught, I give as much, no more.
My eye's been on thon jack-knife, since I lost

My own last night . and it should serve to cut
My bread and cheese till the day I lose my relish
For them and beer—and so know I'm in hell
Yet, you may have it back, on one condition
If you will follow Spanker, and plant it deep
Betwixt his shoulder blades . You won't? Well,
well,

It doesn't seem you set much value on it,
If you'll not do a little thing like that
To get it back We'd best be stepping out .
And, as you're done with them, I may as tite *
Pocket thon beelplates they might fetch a penny,
One thing I can't abide—that's wilful waste.

KESTREL EDGE

PERSONS

REUBEN ANGERTON, *a young sheep-master.*

GIDEON ANGERTON, *his younger brother*

NAOMI ANGERTON, *their mother*

KESTREL EDGE

SCENE: *The parlour of Kestrel Edge, the farmstead of a big sheep-farm on the Border. It is about half-past seven on a November evening. NAOMI ANGERTON, a widow of forty-five, sits with her knitting in her hand, now gazing abstractedly into the fire, now glancing restlessly at the clock. Supper is laid for two. Presently, a sound of wheels is heard without. NAOMI listens, but doesn't rise: and before long REUBEN ANGERTON, a strapping young, well-to-do sheep-master of twenty-five, enters, unbuttoning his greatcoat which he throws carelessly on a chair. He strides to the hearth; and stands with his back to the fire, his hands behind him, warming them.*

REUBEN: A raw night, mother.

NAOMI:

You're back?

REUBEN:

And glad to be so.

The wind's a perisher. I might have come
Straight from New Zealand—I'm such frozen mutton—
Could scarcely hold the reins. It's going to snow.

NAOMI: And what's the news?

REUBEN: The news?—that Kestrel Edge
Has lost the best tup ever bred there.

NAOMI:

Sheep!

I ask for news; and hear you've lost a sheep.

But, happen, you've found something will make up?

PERSONS

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NAOMI:

Sheep!

I ask for news; and hear you've lost a sheep.

But, happen, you've found something will make up?

When you set out to sell a ram, you don't
Expect to bring him back

REUBEN Make up for him?

Nothing could make up for a tup like thou

NAOMI Not even gold?

REUBEN Nay, not his weight in gold.

NAOMI And that would be?

RELBN Somewhere around ten stone.

NAOMI And how far short's the price?

REUBEN I hardly know

What it would turn the scale at, paid in sovereigns.

But it's gey light in notes, not half an ounce

Naomi How many notes?

REUBEN Five notes

NAOMI Five hundreds?

REUBEN Ay

NAOMI That's naught to grumble at—a tidy sum

REFUSE I could have had it twice over, for two such tups

There were two agents, bidding against each other
For Kestrel King

NAOMI Pity you hadn't two

REUBEN 'Two, mother? There has never been a tup
The like of him

NAOMI Havers! You know my father
Got twice the sum for Border Chief

REUBEN That's so

Then were the golden days for breeding sheep
But Kestrel .

NAOMI Oh, I'm sick to death of sheep'
It's always tups and ewes, and ewes and tups,

Cheviots and Southdowns, Hedderwicks and Leicesters,
Till I'm sheep-witted with the bleat of men.

Best take your supper.

REUBEN (*seating himself at the table*): Just two places?

NAOMI: Ay.

I took tea late; and couldn't touch a bite.

REUBEN: Where's Gideon?

NAOMI: How should I know? Like enough
Looking for lost sheep: he's sheep-watty too,
Like all the Angertons.

REUBEN: Gideon? He hardly kens
A Border-Leicester from a Hedderwick.

NAOMI: But he's an eye for black sheep.

REUBEN: True enough—
Reclaiming them, and all—takes after father.

NAOMI: He's half your father: you're the other half.

REUBEN: Ay, father was sheep-master of two flocks.

NAOMI: Yet, souls or mutton, it was always sheep.
But, all the same, I'm glad you've got that price
Just now.

REUBEN: Just now? We're nothing short of cash.

NAOMI: I'm glad you've got your father's gift with
sheep:

And Kestrel Edge will prosper. Gideon's flock
Of blood-washed sinners wouldn't fetch one-half—
One-hundredth.

REUBEN: Mocker, they're beyond all price.

NAOMI: They should be, from the looks of them—
pure gold

Inside, I'd fancy, instead of flesh and blood
 But I've a notion Gideon's heart just now
 Is not so set on rescuing black sheep
 As spoiling John Hall of his one ewe-lamb

REUBEN What, Hetty?

NAOMI Ay, and your heart too should be,
 At your age, Reuben

REUBEN Coveting ewe-lambs?
 I've flocks enough.

NAOMI Ay, sheep and sheep and sheep!
 Time you were wedded I'd have gone .

(Breaks off)

Gone where?

REUBEN
 You're not

NAOMI What am I saying? I only mean
 That I'd feel easier with you settled down

REUBEN Easier? Why should you be uneasy?

Well,

NAOMI You always were my favourite, and I feel,
 If anything should happen

(Breaks off)

REUBEN What should happen?

NAOMI Things happen suddenly

REUBEN Ay . . . ay, you mean
 Like father's death.

NAOMI . . . I wasn't meaning that.

REUBEN I'm sorry, mother if I'd taken thought,
 I'd not have mentioned

NAOMI And why shouldn't you mention
 Your father's death?

REUBEN . . . Well, it's not good to think of

NAOMI You're always thinking of it and you brood:

And brooding's apt to hatch out evil thoughts.
Everyone knows it was . . . The jury found . . .

(Breaks off.)

REUBEN : The jury brought it in an accident.

NAOMI: And he died suddenly, likely knowing nothing—

An easier death than many at his age
Might look for. I'd far rather die like that
Than linger.

REUBEN: Ay—but cut off in his prime.

NAOMI: His prime—at seventy? But you're right enough:

The Angertons ripen slowly—only reach
Their prime when they're about three-score-and-ten.

REUBEN: Ay, oaks that bear no acorns till they're sixty.

NAOMI: And they're still hale and hearty men at ninety.

But I'm no Angerton. I've no time to spare:
The Kales are not long-lived.

REUBEN : At forty-five,
Your thoughts are turning to the graveyard?

NAOMI : Nay,

Not to the graveyard yet : but if I live
Till seventy, two-thirds of life are gone ;
And I've not yet begun . . .

(Breaks off.)

REUBEN : Not yet begun ?

NAOMI: You wouldn't understand. And I've a deal
To sort upstairs before I go to bed.

REUBEN: A deal to sort at this hour? That's not like you.

NAOMI. Not like the me you know. Yet, I've a
sight

Of things to settle I'll have no time to-morrow.
But I'll slip down again at ten o'clock
To bid you both good-night. Likely, by then
Your brother will be back—I know the Halls
Keep early hours—and hungry from his courting
They talk of lovers fasting, but no lass
Has ever spoilt an Angerton's appetite
And even the loss of Kestrel King doesn't seem
To spoil your relish for your food

REUBEN

That's so

I'm doing well that raw wind's put an edge
On my appetite and yet I don't much like
Thinking of thou poor sheep, crossing the waves.

NAOMI True Angerton, fretting for a seasick sheep!
Where is it bound for—Canada?

REUBEN

Nay, mother,

For South America What ever put
Canada into your head?

NAOMI

Dear knows, but I

Can't stay here, chattering of sheep till midnight.
I've something else to do and think of

REUBEN

Well,

If only folk would keep their tongues to sheep—
Ay, and their hearts from mischief—it would be . . .

NAOMI A blessed world!

(NAOMI goes out, shutting the door behind her.)

REUBEN

And it's the devil's own.

*(REUBEN turns from the table, and sits brooding
over the fire. After a while the door bursts*

open, and GIDEON ANGERTON enters hurriedly, shutting it behind him; sinks into a chair with a groan; and sits with his head in his hands.)

REUBEN: What's up? Don't tell me the ewe-lamb won't . . .

GIDEON: Lamb?

REUBEN: Ay, Hetty.

GIDEON: Hetty—oh, don't talk of her!

REUBEN: As bad as that? What's wrong?

GIDEON: What's wrong? What's wrong?

The devil has the whole world in his grip.

REUBEN: Just what I said.

GIDEON: You?

REUBEN: Though not so familiar

With Nick as some, mayn't I just mention him

Once in a while: or have you local-preachers

The only right to make free with his name?

But what's upset you now? Don't say a shower's

Sluiced off the whitewash from your precious flock,

And left them patchy piebalds?

GIDEON: You can flee—

And father lying . . .

REUBEN: Father's in his grave.

GIDEON: His blood is crying for vengeance from the ground.

REUBEN: Gideon!

GIDEON: Oh, you don't know! Oh, you don't know!

REUBEN: Whisht, Gideon, not so loud: remember mother.

GIDEON: Where is she?

REUBEN

In her room

GIDEON

She couldn't hear—

Though soon she must hear, all the world shall
hear . .

REUBEN Where have you been?

GIDEON

With Zachariah Dodd.

REUBEN So and what bitters does old Zachariah
keep nowadays to wet his whistle with?

GIDEON And you can jest? But you don't know.
O God!

REUBEN What don't I know? What's he been tell-
ing you?

GIDEON Reuben, I can't tell how to break it to
you

REUBEN Let it burst out itself, if it must come.
So he's been telling you?

GIDEON

How father died

He saw it all It was no accident

It wasn't his own gun that did for him,

'Though everybody thought he'd caught the trigger

Crossing the fence 'Twas Robert Ellershaw

Crouched in the ditch, and shot him through the
hedge.

REUBEN And you believe what that old dotard says?

GIDEON He spoke the truth he swore it on the
Book

REUBEN Yet he said nothing at the inquest?

GIDEON

Nay—

I couldn't understand . .

REUBEN

He didn't tell you

Why he had held his peace?

REUBEN: Why did he tell you after all these months?

REUBEN: Why did he tell you after all these months?

REUBEN: He said that?

REUBEN: He said that?

Happen, he judged I'd better break it to you—
You might do something desperate. But you don't—
Don't seem to realise, somehow : and yet,
Small wonder ! I was struck all of a heap
At first ; and couldn't move.

GIDEON: It's come . . . You do not mean you
knew?

GIDEON: It's come . . . You do not mean you
knew?

GIDEON: You knew, and never . . . O my God!
My God!

GIDEON: You knew, and never . . . O my God!
My God!

GIDEON : And you let . . .

GIDEON : And you let . . .

GIDEON: But, Zachariah?

GIDEON: But, Zachariah?

With sovereigns and with promises.

With sovereigns and with promises.

REUBEN : I wanted time to think—to think it out.

REUBEN : I wanted time to think—to think it out.

To see the murderer hanged?

To see the murderer hanged?

GIDEON: Then why . . .

GIDEON: Then why . . .

REUBEN When I began to think,
It wasn't quite so plain You see .

GIDEON Not I.

Duty is duty

RECZEN Ay, but there was mother

GIDEON: I don't see why

REUBEN. You wouldn't.

Gibson Well, I don't.

The shock, of course—but then, she'd had the shock

Of father's death, already and even then,

You cannot let a murderer escape

Just to spare people's feelings

REUBEN So it seems.

But mother .

GIDEON You don't mean that mother knew !

REUBEN Nay, God forbid! It was an accident,
As far as mother knew How could she guess,

When I'd stopped Zachariah's mouth with gold?

GIDEON And promises—what promises?

REUBEN Of vengeance.

GIDEON Vengeance—when there's the law?

RECEIVED I said I'd take

The law in my own hands

GIDEON You never meant

REUBEN I hardly know I had to keep him quiet
At any cost.

GIDEON But why?

REUBEN To think it out.

GIDEON: I don't see . . .

REUBEN There was mother

GIDEON Always mother!

Reuben, you never mean . . .

REUBEN : I only mean,
If Robert Ellershaw were tried and hanged
For father's murder, there'd be talk.

GIDEON : My God !
Talk ! And you'd let a murderer go scot-free
For fear of tattle ? What have we to fear ?
Justice is justice : and what have you gained ?
Murder will out : and Zachariah's blabbed ;
And there'll be talk enough now.

REUBEN : So it seems.

GIDEON : I still don't understand.

REUBEN : It's difficult—
And I hardly know if I've a right to say it,
But Gideon, Robert Ellershaw and mother
Are just about of an age.

GIDEON : Reuben !

REUBEN : And father
Was twenty-five years older : and you know
Father was hard.

GIDEON : A just, God-fearing man.

REUBEN : Ay, just, but hard. You never heard him
speak

A kindly word to mother in your life.

GIDEON : Happen ; but that's no reason . . .

REUBEN : Nay, God knows !
No reason, but . . . Oh, if I only knew !

GIDEON : You knew the murderer. And you don't
think mother . . .

REUBEN : God knows, I think no harm of her : but
Gideon,

It's long been plain who Robert Ellershaw
Had set his heart on—why he never wed

GIDEON You think I never saw .

REUBEN You never saw ;

But other folk have eyes and if I'd let
Old Zachariah talk, no power on earth
Could have kept mother's name out.

GIDEON You forget

Your duty to the dead

REUBEN The dead are dead .

Our duty cannot save them—bring them back
And have we got no duty to the living ?
I couldn't let mother suffer

GIDEON So, you thought
To spare her ? But you reckoned without God
God won't be mocked Oh, you can flee at me,
His servant, but my God's the God of truth,
And truth prevails You thought to act a lie
You saw your duty plain, and yet you shirked it
Afraid of evil tongues or, in your pride,
You thought to pit yourself against God's justice
And now, what have you gained ? But God is just .
You failed him, and He's chosen me, His servant,
To be His instrument My duty's plain,
And I'll not shrink

REUBEN Gideon, what will you do ?

GIDEON Speak out the truth the law must take its
course

REUBEN But it's too late

GIDEON How can it ever be
Too late to do God's work ?

REUBEN : If you speak now,
All will come out : you can't tell half the truth.

GIDEON : I'll tell the whole truth. What should I
hold back ?

REUBEN : You'd tell them I knew all before the
inquest ?

And that I stopped old Zachariah's mouth ?

GIDEON : O God, I was forgetting ! Yet, if I don't,
I'll be a traitor too, and to no purpose ;
For Zachariah will not hold his tongue.
He hinted he'd heard something—said he guessed
If we didn't act, and quickly too, to lay
The murderer by the heels, he would escape.

REUBEN : Escape ?

GIDEON : Ay, Ellershaw's leaving Burnshawgate :
He means to fly the country, seemingly.

REUBEN : I've never heard a word of it. He can't
Be throwing up his farm in such a hurry.

GIDEON : Well, Zachariah's sure of it : and it's just
Because it's been kept so quiet, it's dead-certain
He means to sneak away, and hide himself.

REUBEN : To fly the country ? It might be best to
let . . .

GIDEON : You'd never let him go, and put your
soul . . .

But God will not be mocked. The murderer's fate
Is not in our hands. Zachariah threatened
That if we didn't, he would speak out now.
He said he wouldn't sell his soul for gold :
I didn't understand him—now I see.
He is an old man, Reuben, and nigh death ;

To speak ; but I must keep my promise.

GIDEON : Reuben !

REUBEN : I said I'd take the law into my hands.

GIDEON : You mean . . .

REUBEN : I mean a man has killed my father,
And he must die.

GIDEON : You mean . . . but there's the law.

REUBEN : The time's gone by for that : and anyway,
If he's to die, why should I thrust the job
Of killing my father's murderer on the shoulders
Of someone else ?

GIDEON : But it's the law.

REUBEN : Whose law ?

GIDEON : But Reuben, you would send your soul to
hell.

REUBEN : My soul has lived in hell for these twelve
months.

GIDEON : Ay—it may be the way that God appoints
For your redemption.

REUBEN : It's the way to spare
My mother. Folk will talk ; but they'll not know.
There'll be no trial, no cross-questioning.

GIDEON : No trial—you mean you'd take your own
life too ?

Reuben, it's terrible—I cannot bear . . .
But it may be God's way to save your soul
Alive. God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform. We cannot see—
Blinded by sin, we stumble. Yet he spake
To Zachariah's heart through me : and now
My words have roused you.

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, I've done nothing.

GIDEON : Nothing ?

REUBEN : I couldn't.

GIDEON : You have shirked again ?

REUBEN : I've shirked.

GIDEON : But where've you been ?

REUBEN : To Burnshawgate.

GIDEON : And you've come back without . . . He's still alive ?

REUBEN : He's still alive. I went to Burnshawgate :
The snow was in my face—it's snowing now :

I knew 'twould snow to-night, with that raw wind . . .

GIDEON : And you can talk of snow ! Have you gone crazed ?

REUBEN : Happen—it's hard to tell : but I don't fancy I'm crazy now.

GIDEON : You went to Burnshawgate—
And then ?

REUBEN : As I drew near it through the snow—
The snow blew in my teeth, and stung my face . . .

GIDEON : My God ! Speak out, speak out ! As you drew near ?

REUBEN : I saw the parlour-window, lighted up :
It looked so homely . . .

GIDEON : God's destroyed your wits.

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, hear me out. The blinds were up :

And, as I paused a moment on the threshold,
I saw into the room. It looked so warm
And bright and cosy there, out of the wind—
So safe : and I, out in the wind and snow,

With cold death in my hand

GIDEON

The curse of God

Is on you

REUBEN Nay, you'll never understand

But hear me out I haven't much to tell.

I looked, and saw him, standing by the fire,

Unconscious, while . . .

GIDEON

Alone? Oh, Reuben, say

He was alone! Mother's upstairs—you're sure?

REUBEN You dare to think that she . . . He was
alone,

And gazing into the fire with smiling eyes:

And as I watched him there, it seemed so crazy—

First, father, standing upright in his pride,

And Robert, creeping up to lay him low;

Then Robert, standing upright in his pride

Of life, and I . . . when in a few short years

We'll all be lying low enough, without . . .

GIDEON You saw him standing—and you did not
fire?

REUBEN My God, you never thought I meant to
do it

Without his knowing? You fancied I'd sneak up

To a man's house, and shoot him from behind?

GIDEON Well, I don't understand but you've not
done it,

Whatever you meant to do

REUBEN

I haven't done it

I couldn't call him out, somehow . . . it seemed

So crazy—he and I should stand out there,

Facing each other in the falling snow,

That one might stretch the other stiff and stark,
When anyway . . . And that could never end it.
If I had fallen . . .

GIDEON : So, you were afraid ?

REUBEN : Hardly afraid : but, if I'd fallen, Robert
Could scarcely have escaped a second time :
And . . .

GIDEON : Nay, by God !

REUBEN : And mother would be spared
Nothing.

GIDEON : God would have sped the bullet straight
To the scoundrel's heart : but you have failed God
twice.

REUBEN : I'm not so sure that God . . .

GIDEON : His curse is on you :
But I'm His servant ; and I'm not afraid.

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, listen : God . . .

GIDEON : I will not hearken
While you blaspheme. You've always been a mocker ;
And it's the tempter, speaking through your mouth.
You've let him make his nest within your heart—
The old serpent ; and it's his, the tongue that speaks.
But woe to them that take His name in vain !
And God shall bruise the serpent's head : my heel . . .

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, listen : it is not for men
To punish such as Robert.

GIDEON : But God makes
Of man His instrument of wrath. You'd let
The murderer escape ?

REUBEN : I'd let him go
Where he is bound for : but he can't escape

From his own deed . trust God to see to that.

GIDEON You'd let him go ?

REUBEN Why not, if Zachariah

Was right , and Ellershaw is set on flitting ?

GIDEON Never ! He shan't escape and anyway,
You've Zachariah still to reckon with.

REUBEN I'll talk to him to-morrow With Robert
gone,

The old man may be silenced He'll never guess
That Ellershaw could be brought back again
I'll find a way to stop his mouth he's failing,
'Twon't be for long

GIDEON You may bribe Zachariah
To silence but you can't buy God with gold,
Or blind Him with the smoke of your burnt-offerings—
They are abomination in His nostrils.
He is a jealous God , and overturns
The altars of the infidel , and quenches
The fires of Baal and of Ashtoreth
And I'm His servant , and you cannot stop
My mouth

REUBEN But Gideon, you would never speak,
After I've told you .

GIDEON Robert Ellershaw
Shall pay the price his blood be on his head

REUBEN Hush, Gideon—mother !

*(The door opens, and NAOMI ANGERTON enters
Neither REUBEN nor GIDEON looks up, but
both stand with eyes fixed on the fire)*

NAOMI You're not quarrelling ?
I thought I heard

REUBEN: Nay, we're not quarrelling.

NAOMI: That's well; for I'd not have you quarrel to-night.

REUBEN: To-night?

NAOMI: My last night here: I leave to-morrow.

REUBEN: You leave?

NAOMI: I'm leaving Kestrel Edge to-morrow
For Canada.

GIDEON: With Robert Ellershaw?

NAOMI (*starting*): How did you guess?

GIDEON: O God, and so my mother's
A murderer's . . .

REUBEN (*clapping a hand to GIDEON's mouth*): Nay!
none of your Bible-talk:

You shall not turn your preacher's dirty tongue
On your own mother. (*To NAOMI*) Come, you'd best
sit down:

You're faint.

NAOMI (*sinking into a seat, and speaking with a dazed
voice*): But why does he say "murderer"?

The coroner's jury found . . . the whole world knows . . .

GIDEON: And the whole world shall know it for a lie.
It was no accident: your fancy-man . . .

REUBEN: Gideon!

GIDEON: I'll not be hushed. Your fancy-man
Slunk down behind the hedge, and shot your husband.

NAOMI: You lie—they fought!

REUBEN: Mother, you didn't know
Ellershaw'd killed . . .

NAOMI: Reuben, my son, I knew:
And I'll speak out the truth, think what you will.

You cannot judge, till you've come through what I have,

Though happen, Reuben, you may understand
He told me all—though, from the first, I knew.
I never thought it was an accident—

He would have spared me; but I made him tell:
I wrung it out of him They fought for me.

REUBEN For you?

NAOMI As many a time two men have fought
For a woman's sake You cannot understand:
You're boys, and don't know what it is to love

GIDEON He told you that?

NAOMI I wrung it out of him.

He only told me, when he found I knew

It was no accident he tried to spare me.

They fought for me he heard your father's gun,

And took his own, and went right up to him

Where he was rabbiting, and challenged him.

And then they fought like men. Your father fell;

And Robert . .

GIDEON Sneaked into his .

REUBEN Hold your peace!

Mother, he lied to you He lay in wait,

And murdered father—shot him through the hedge.

NAOMI (*starting up*) Nay, it's not true!

REUBEN Mother, I fear it's true

For he was seen

NAOMI Seen? I don't understand—

Who saw?

REUBEN Old Zachariah Dodd

NAOMI He saw—

And never told?—the inquest . . .

REUBEN: I had stopped
His mouth . . .

NAOMI: You knew, and never said a word?

REUBEN: How could I guess that you knew Robert
had killed . . .

GIDEON: She knew her paramour had killed her
husband:

And she would fly with him.

REUBEN (*to GIDEON*): Another word,
And I'll . . .

NAOMI (*to REUBEN*): Still, though you thought I
didn't know,

Why did you hush it up?

REUBEN: I hoped to spare you:
I knew that Robert . . .

NAOMI: Oh, it's all a lie!
They fought—they fought!

REUBEN: Mother, I fear it's true.

NAOMI: I wrung it out . . . Oh, Reuben, you'll
believe me?

How could I dream Robert had murdered him
Cold-blooded? And I'll not believe it now!

Yet, I'd to wring it, word by word, from him.
I thought he tried to spare me. Now I see.

GIDEON: 'Twas his own neck he tried to save.

NAOMI (*sinking to the ground*): O God,
What have I done!

GIDEON: You're taken in the net
Of your iniquities. God bides His time:
Yet He will not be mocked. He holds His hand;

But, when it falls! You're stricken to your knees:
 And we should all but I This wicked house!
 God's curse is on us all - and I must go .

(REUBEN, *who has been bending over NAOMI,*
looks up)

REUBEN Where are you going?

GIDEON To wrestle with the Lord.

REUBEN (*bending over NAOMI*) - Don't heed him,
 mother. Gideon's just a lad

NAOMI Reuben, you understand?

REUBEN I hardly know

(NAOMI and REUBEN *having their backs to him,*
 GIDEON *takes the gun from the corner, un-*
noticed and steals out of the room REUBEN
looks up as the door closes, and listens till
he hears GIDEON's steps in the room overhead,
and then the sound of his voice praying in
loud tones)

REUBEN He's gone to his own room He'll spend
 the night

On his knees till he drops asleep and in the morning
 I'll see what I can .

NAOMI God has punished me.

SCENE III

SCENE: *The same. NAOMI is still crouched on the ground; and REUBEN, half-kneeling, bends over her. Presently, NAOMI lifts her head; and begins to talk slowly, with eyes fixed on the fire.*

NAOMI: No one will understand: but I must speak.
I've had a hard life of it, from the first.
I never knew my mother—never heard
What had become of her, although I think
She wasn't dead. She may be living yet,
For all I know—and she would understand!
My father never mentioned her to me:
And though I searched the churchyard for her grave,
I never found it: and I dared not ask
My father; and I could not bring myself
To question others, dreading what I might learn.
That was the home I lived in, till the day
My father gave me away—I had no choice:
Who'd ever listen to a chit of a girl,
When it's a question of property and sheep?
I'd happened to come into my father's mind;
Or, rather, had forced myself upon his notice:
I'd asked him for some money to buy hairpins,
My first—I see his face now, as he stared.
“Hairpins?” he says, surprised: “a bairn like you!”
Then looked me up and down: and realising
I was a child no longer, knitted his brows,
And pursed his lips, and looked me over again,
The way he'd judge a filly's points, and reckon

What she would fetch him and next day I learned
He'd chosen a harder man to be my husband.
You knew your father well, I married him,
Though he was well-nigh half as old again,
And I a lass, just turned eighteen I lived—
Nay, but I never lived I slowly froze
Into the block of ice that was my home
Oh, but I cannot tell—and what's the use?
No one will understand

REUBEN.

Mother, speak on,

If it will ease you

NAOMI

And then Robert came

Until he came, I thought I'd turned to ice,
And never would feel anything again :
And then he came to Burnshawgate. We met .
And I felt the fire I'd thought I'd smothered dead
Leap up to meet his fire We loved—but you,
You'll never understand you haven't loved
And I'd not loved till then.

REUBEN

Mother :

NAOMI

You mean

My sons? Yes, Reuben, I've loved you in the fashion
A mother loves her babies but the love
I speak of 's different—different as a furnace
From April sunshine, and it burned the fiercer,
Having been choked so long, so long damped down
It burned me through and through I'd never had
A man's love—and I'd never loved a man.
Some day, you'll learn and son, you will believe—
I know that you'll believe, you are not hard—
I was your father's wife until he died

I had to fight—to trample down the fire,
But never . . .

REUBEN: Mother, I know.

NAOMI: Though, in my heart,
I was all Robert's. When he came, I lived
For the first time; and life became the thing
I'd dreamt it, as a girl—a thrilling hazard,
A flame that searched and stabbed me, and stung my
blood

To madness: and . . . I must tell out the truth—
And even when your father died . . . Oh, you
Will never understand!—'twas all a story—
Two men who fought to win a woman's love,
And I the woman! And when I had wrung
The truth from Robert, or what I took to be . . .
How could I doubt him, when I loved him so?
Son, I'm not trying to excuse myself,
Only to make it clear . . . and I can't see—
Blood's in my eyes now; and I cannot see,
Although I had it all so clear just now:
I saw it in the fire so clear. But you
May pity me, son, if you ever love,
If you are ever burnt up by the flame.
Oh, I was blind with pride—I thought they'd fought
For me: and I was blinded by my love—
The love I thought had come at last—my dream
Come true—and it was all a lie. Naught's true
But hunger and heartache: and I'd loved the lie.
And now, what's to become of me? He said
He'd take me to a new world; and we'd live . . .
I was to live—to live for the first time.

I tried to hold him—said I couldn't go
 So soon but he—his word was law to me.
 I loved him more for taking his own way,
 For mastering me, breaking my will to his
 And now I see all plain, he was afraid—
 Afraid, my man of men! He swore they'd fought
 Fairly . . . Oh, I was blind! He lied to me.
 Your father never lied And I'm blind now,
 Groping in blood-red darkness I thought to grasp
 Love, and it turns to hate that tears my heart.
 If only I could die—if I could die
 To-night—and life was to begin for me
 To-morrow! (*Starting up*) O my God! I had for-
 gotten—

He's coming here he must be on his way.

REUBEN. He's coming here?

NAOMI He was to come to see you,

When I had broken the news, soon after ten

What can I say to him, if he should come?

How can I face . . .

REUBEN Mother, you mustn't see him

I'll meet him on the way, and warn him

NAOMI. Warn him!

REUBEN I'll tell him all is known, and he must fly
 To-night, alone.

NAOMI Yes, he must go alone

REUBEN. And then, to-morrow, I'll see Zachariah,
 And stop his mouth

NAOMI But Gideon, where is he?

REUBEN In his own room I heard him praying
 there—

Though I cannot hear him now. Happen, he sleeps :
Yet, it is queer . . .

(Looks towards the corner near the door.)

My God ! The gun—the gun !

NAOMI : What is it, Reuben ?

REUBEN : I'd have sworn I put . . .

NAOMI : He's killing Robert !

*(As NAOMI speaks, the door is burst open ; and
GIDEON staggers into the room with the gun
in his hands, and stands before NAOMI and
REUBEN with eyes of frenzied triumph.)*

GIDEON : God will not be mocked !

He sent the murderer out to meet his doom
Half-way.

REUBEN : You've shot him, Gideon ?

GIDEON : Ay, I've shot him.

I was God's servant ; and He chose me out
To be His instrument of wrath.

NAOMI : O God !

And Robert, now ! Where are you going, Reuben ?

REUBEN : To look to Robert : there may still be
time—

He mayn't be dead.

GIDEON : He's dead—stone dead : I felt
His heart, to make quite sure : and then I dragged
His carcase to the edge of Blackmire Moss,
And flung it in.

REUBEN : You dragged him through the snow—
Making a trail ; and then brought back the gun ?
You're a fine murderer !

GIDEON : I, a murderer ?

I was God's instrument

REUBEN

And so, you took

Ellershaw's sin on yourself, by murdering him?

GIDEON Murder? It wasn't murder!

REUBEN

"I will be called

Murder, when there's the price to pay

GIDEON

The price?

Murder! O God, I never realised . . .

My hands are red with blood. I feel the brand

Searing my brow Reuben, I dare not die!

You'll save me—you'll not let them take me, Reuben,

And hang me by the neck?

REUBEN

They shall not take you

NAOMI He must escape, before . . .

REUBEN

There's no escape

For any of us in this world now we're trapped

If he fled now, they'd only track him down

We must abide our fate, and face it out.

GIDEON The rope's about my neck, and I'll drop
sheer

Into the everlasting fire! But you—

You said you'd save me!

REUBEN

They'll not take you, Gideon.

You've done no crime 'twas I who murdered Robert.

NAOMI Reuben!

GIDEON

You mean . . .

REUBEN

'Twas my job from the first.

If I'd not shirked it . . .

GIDEON

Nay, you shall not take . . .

And yet, it was your job—the eldest son

REUBEN It was my job the blood be on my head

NAOMI: Reuben, you shall not! God, what have I done!

REUBEN: Mother, you must keep silence now. We can't Undo what has been done. We can but wait:
And if to-morrow bring the worst, it's I
Must go with them: and you must speak no word.

GIDEON: Reuben, you shall not give your life for mine . . .

And yet I cannot die—I cannot die. . . .
Murder? It wasn't murder? I was chosen
To be God's instrument of wrath—to bring
Confusion on His enemies—yea, I—
The sword of the Lord and Gideon! It's choking me,
The halter: and I feel the flames—the flames
Of the everlasting fire! I dare not die.
'Twas your job, Reuben: and you said you'd save me!
The devil has me in his clutch—the flames!

(He falls to the floor in a swoon.)

NAOMI: I mustn't speak; but let you . . . and live on?

REUBEN: Mother, you'll promise—the last thing I ask you?

NAOMI: I promise, son.

REUBEN: And, mother, you'll not take . . .

NAOMI: Nay, I will live life out—my punishment,
To live life out. I may last twenty years.
I boasted I'd begin to live to-morrow;
And my new life begins. I'll see it through,
My new life—and I've only done to death
My husband, and my lover, and my son!

REUBEN: You must look after Gideon: he's only swooned.

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